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Prologue

Yesterday's blue skies have turned into today's cloudy morning. The heavy, ashen clouds cling to the city, enveloping it. It's 30 degrees celsius, with 70% humidity.

It smells like damp soil outside, and small honey bees are buzzing around the white flowers by the entrance. I roughly shake off the troublesome little things. Just the sound of buzzing is enough to make me irritated. For the first time in my life I understand what it feels like to be so angry your blood boils. The urge to break something well up in my body from the hatred I'm feeling. Then, a silent sadness. The feeling of despair after suddenly taking the precious life of another being. If one of my family members died, it'd feel like I died myself. The eyes are one of the organs I'd least like to lose. It's the same as the heart, brain, and other organs that are necessary for life. However, it's not the body that controls your eyes, but your mind.

"U… Waaah!"

My right hand strikes the pavement hard. I had no choice but to get hurt somewhere. My nails get scratched and I've got scrapes from the gravel, so I'm bleeding a bit, but I'm okay. Just this much is nothing. Compared to Wolf, anyway.

The envelope doesn't have the name of the sender. Enclosed is the wing of a small, white butterfly, and a picture of Wolf. There's no doubt about it. I only knew her for a short time, but I loved Wolf so much. She was as wise, noble, and beautiful as a real wolf. Unfortunately, she ran away, but I'm still hoping she'll come back. I feel lonely, but I'm relieved she's alright. In the photo, Wolf is laying down defenselessly. When I flip over the picture, I'm horrified. It's the photographer dissecting her. They made sure I'd see it last.

Finally, the rain starts to fall. Polka dots appear on the pavement, before giving way to complete darkness. The butterfly wing has been crushed and lost its shape as it sits on the pavement.

Photograph in hand, I walk to Sakurako-san's house. The occasional raindrop turns into a full blown rain storm, robbing the city of colour. The completely grey world almost feels overwhelming to me right now.

Gran looks really surprised to see me standing in the entrance, completely drenched. I don't really feel like chatting with her today. She's a kind person, but I'm just a lump of pure hatred right now. Gran seems to notice that I'm not myself today, so she calls for Sakurako-san right away.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

I don't know how to answer. Nothing comes out of my mouth. I hand Sakurako-san the envelope, but she says, "come inside first."

I head to the silent living room, surrounded by bones. This house is always quiet and still, since it's just the two of them living here. Sakurako-san has me sit on the couch while she gets a towel and some hot milk.

"This is Wolf?" She mutters, sitting in her usual chair. "Since there were butterfly wings in it, we can assume this is the work of Hanabusa."

"…"

Sakurako-san silently stares at the picture for a while. I can't bring myself to look at that horrifying picture, so I watch the steam rising out of my cup instead. It's the same pale white as a skeleton.

"It's weird." She finally breaks the silence. "It's like he's trying to show us the dog's cause of death."

"So… What's weird about that?"

As my anger and sadness starts to die down, I start feeling really tired. It's too troublesome for me to think about what she means.

"It's not beautiful. This isn't like Hanabusa," Sakurako-san explains with a puzzled expression. "This isn't a beautiful way to kill something. It's extremely violent. From this picture, it looks like this dog has been hit with a blunt weapon and kicked. It's like a different form of cruelty from what he normally does. In the first place, it's not his style to kill with his own hands. Breaking his own rules puts him in danger with the law, so he wouldn't do that."

"Then… Why?"

Why would he do this? Why hurt Wolf like this?

Suddenly, I get a text on my phone. It's from an unknown number, but I instinctively know who it's from.

Phantom: Turn on the TV.

My hands are shaking, but I turn on the TV as instructed. I don't know which channel, so I flick through them. Given the time, it's mostly anime for kids and evening news programs. What am I supposed to be looking for? Eventually, I stop on a particular channel. It's showing Hokkaido news. It says "live" at the top, so I guess something is happening right now. A reporter is answering the announcer's questions while standing in front of a familiar police station.

"So this man, who is thought to be the culprit, is also dead?"

"Yes. He was confirmed to be dead on arrival. It's believed that he committed suicide after killing a man."

"I understand. That was live from the scene in Asahikawa."

The announcer goes on to say, "well that was pretty shocking news," and concludes the broadcast.

"What happened?"

Sakurako-san leans back from the TV, and shakes her head at my question. The national news starts before I can change the channel. There's a story about a man who was

suffering from domestic violence who was killed by the man his wife was having an affair with. It happened in the neighbourhood where I live. The murderer supposedly caused trouble for his neighbours before, and was seen killing stray cats.

"I was just walking my dog, and he suddenly started chasing me with a baseball bat."

We watch as one of the people from the neighbourhood answers questions during their interview. I ask Sakurako-san for an answer.

The meaning of the messages from Phantom - Hanabusa.

"Could it be… Hanabusa did this to Wolf in place of me… or something like that?"

"No. I don't know what his true intentions are. He drowns the hearts of other people like this. Taking a life as retribution for the loss of another is evil. Nothing but pure evil," Sakurako-san says clearly, and shakes her head at me.

Even besides serial killers, the world is full of cruel and evil people. People lose their lives every day, and someone is always crying. Someone is always feeling the despair of losing someone precious to them. How are you supposed to defend yourself? How do you stop the blood from flowing? My summer is starting, drenched in rain and adversity.

First Bone: Time of the Wolves

Part 1

Isozaki-sensei is originally from Sapporo, but he often says he'd like to permanently live in Asahikawa or Tokachi.

"I just want nice weather, nice soil and water, and a big garden."

He lives in an apartment in the city, surrounded by flowers every day, but he'd rather grow his plants in the ground than in planters. He wants to live alone in a place where nobody will visit, surrounded by his flowers. Every time he talks about things like that, it makes me wonder why he became a teacher. When someone asks why, he just gives them a knowing smile and doesn't tell them anything. The one thing I do know about him is that he's more similar to Sakurako-san than I am. I can feel it in the air when we're together. So I'm sure he would never hurt me.

Isozaki-sensei has been inviting me over lately, since he knows I'm nervous about butterfly season. I haven't left the house much lately, especially after what happened to Wolf. He usually asks me to help him with things, so maybe he's just using me. Today, he asked me to help him prepare a flower bed at the outer edge of the schoolyard. It doesn't stand out much, but it's a nice spot next to a Japanese plum tree. Isozaki-sensei has been given permission to do whatever he wants with it. I figured the flowers just bloomed when their season came and that was it, but it takes a surprising amount of work to keep the flower beds tidy. I have to help with deadheading the old flowers, and planting new ones to make sure it stays in bloom. Isozaki-sensei tells me all about flower maintenance while I help him, just like how Sakurako-san tells me about bones.

It's almost July now. It was raining for 2 weeks, and the weather lady says it's the Ezo rainy season, but now it's been hot all week. The sky is deep blue, and flowers all over the city

are in full bloom. Even though I'm not too interested in flowers, it's a lot of fun to see all the bright red and yellow flowers in summer.

"Yeah, this looks good," Isozaki-sensei says with a big smile as he wipes the mud off his face. He usually hates getting dirty, but it seems like he doesn't mind when it comes to flowers.

"That flower is pretty big. It looks like a hollyhock, but kind of different."

It almost looks like a strangely coloured sunflower or chrysanthemum. When Isozaki-sensei sees the tall, brightly coloured flower I'm pointing at, he smiles.

"You're right, it's not a hollyhock. It's a plant that Maeterlinck described as a melancholy rocket."

"A melancholy rocket?"

A countless number of white, bell shaped flowers with purplish-red specks inside certainly do give off an unpleasant feeling. They're pretty, but also strangely grotesque.

"I love them, but they aren't a very popular flower."

"What kind of flower is it?" I ask. Isozaki-sensei shrugs.

"Witches thimble, foxglove, fairy's hat, dead man's bell…"

"Dead man's?"

"That's right. It's because it's poisonous."

"What?! Poison?!"

"Yeah, it's digitalis."

The wind suddenly picks up.

"Wha- Those really are poisonous!"

That's right. Along with potassium cyanide, wolf's bane, and arsenic, it's one of the famous poisons used in mysteries. A small amount can be used as medicine, but in larger quantities it can kill a person.

"It's a garden species, so it's okay. It's still a little toxic, though."

"Shouldn't you not use it if it's toxic?! This is a school!"

"This amount is nothing to worry about. There are much more dangerous plants. Tobacco is much more harmful. Speaking of toxic plants, daffodils, and even Adonis ramosa that bloom in the spring can be harmful as well."

Then why plant them? I have to raise my voice to be heard over the wind. Isozaki-sensei says "but they have a mysterious beauty," while looking at the digitalis lovingly.

"Well, if we were to start banning everything that's potentially harmful, there'd be no end to it, right?"

Suddenly I feel nervous about being next to the flowers, so I gently step back. Isozaki-sensei let's out an exaggerated sigh. It just seemed like a normal, lovely flower bed before this conversation.

"It's not that easy to kill people with poison. It takes a lot for someone to die from it."

"If you don't hit the lethal dose, you can even drink potassium cyanide without dying… I heard that from Sakurako-san once."

"That's right. Basically, people don't die that easily. I'd rather use a more logical method than poisonous plants, too," He says with a straight face.

His voice is quiet. I'm perplexed by his sudden piercing gaze. It's different from Sakurako-san's cold look. It's much darker.

“Even if it’s betraying what you truly want, the human body desperately tries to continue living.”

“Isozaki-sensei, umm…”

“The way you said that makes it sound like you want to die, sensei.” A woman’s voice suddenly interrupts our conversation.

“Oh.”

I turn my head to see who it is. A girl is standing there, with the deep green grass stretching out behind her. She had long hair when we first met, but now it’s been cut to her shoulders. But she looks healthier than before.

“Minami-san?”

She’s wearing a skirt and some light makeup. She looks a lot more mature than she used to. She’s older than me, but she’s Isozaki-sensei’s student. She fell into Hanabusa’s clutches before, and got involved with the murder of her friend. It hurts my heart when I think about how she must have felt.

Before the tragedy happened, people said that the three girls, Hitoe Madoka, Futaba Nishizawa, and Minami Tsutsumi, were like sisters. It all started when Futaba-san became suicidal. She tried to get the other girls to commit suicide with her. She wanted the three of them to be together. Minami refused, and tried to run away because she was scared of dying. Hitoe ended up strangling Futaba, causing Minami to regret abandoning her.

I wish I could understand those girls’ hearts. It feels like something I shouldn’t touch, like a spider’s web. Fragile yet strong, like it ensnares anything it touches.

“It’s been a while.” Minami-san looks a little embarrassed as she waves at us.

I wave back.

“Me, commit suicide? Of course not, it would be pointless.” Isozaki-sensei shrugs at the implication that he’d kill himself.

I figured he’d say something like that.

“Is that right? But it seems to me that you do pointless things all the time.”

She glances at me like she knows something. I instinctively flinch back.

“Maybe it was pointless to you, but it wasn’t to me.”

“I guess so… Not like there’s a lot of truly important things in the world.” Minami-san gives a weak smile.

The pessimistic atmosphere softly touches my heart. What, and how much, does she know with those butterfly wings on her back?

“I got your email the other day, but since I never got around to replying, I thought I’d just come here directly.”

It’s not like I don’t welcome her or anything, but why is she here for something that would only take a second? She seems to have understood the tension between Isozaki-sensei and I, since she slid into the conversation without seeming like she was interrupting.

“I see. I’m relieved to see you looking well,” Isozaki-sensei says, smiling.

Hitoe-san killed one of her best friends, and Minami-san helped her bury the body to protect them both. Hitoe-san was accused of being hired to kill Futaba-san, but she had no intent to kill, and she only killed out of fear because she thought she would be killed if she didn't. After considering the fact that she was a minor at the time, amongst other things, they decided to give her a suspended sentence. The same is true for Minami-san. She was accused of abandoning the corpse, but she ended up not being sentenced to prison. Is it okay to say it's a bastion of fortune during all the sorrow, or was it too much of a tragedy?

Isozaki-sensei's face shows no expression while he listens to Minami-san catch him up on her current situation. He seems like he already knew. No, I'm almost certain he already knew. Even now he's still being held prisoner by Minami-san and Hitoe-san's curse.

I look up at the fluffy, white clouds to try to ease the heaviness of the conversation. The sunlight is strong today, so it casts a dark shadow behind Minami-san. The way she talks so casually about something so horrific in the bright, summery schoolyard seems like something out of a nightmare. I start feeling light headed.

"I think Hitoe will finally be able to relax soon," Minami-san says with a sigh.

I manage to calm myself down.

"I know that we can never change what happened, and we'll regret it for the rest of our lives. It feels like if we're happy, we'd be betraying Futaba and her parents," she says plainly.

I don't think it helps anyone to keep making yourself suffer. Everyone has the right to be happy, but at the same time, it pains me to think about Futaba-san's parents, who have been left behind. The bereaved family will still be just that for their whole lives, even if Futaba-san wanted to die. Seeing the girls who took their daughter's life living happily must be heartbreaking for Futaba-san's parents. But you won't die from a broken heart, you'll gradually start to recover. However, for Hitoe-san's parents, Futaba-san is the one who "killed" their daughter. Does one person's death destroy the lives of everyone around it, like some kind of virus?

"Hitoe has wanted to apologize to you one more time for all the trouble we caused you, sensei," Minami-san says while kicking pebbles around with the toe of her shoes.

"I couldn't end up helping you, though," Isozaki-sensei shakes his head.

"No, that's not true. This time, we'll both go. Next time… I'll definitely bring Hitoe to apologize."

Even though she hangs her head as she makes her declaration, her confidence shines through.

"…Yeah."

Isozaki-sensei also drops his gaze. The two of them don't make eye contact.

"Well, that's all I wanted to say."

With that, Minami-san turns on her heel and leaves just as abruptly as she showed up.

"See ya," she calls back over her shoulder. Her expression as she leaves makes me think that has a double meaning, somehow.

Maybe she wishes Sakurako-san was here instead of me. Or that she wasn't here, but instead at the Kujo house with gran preparing a warm meal. Isozaki-sensei watches her from behind with an ambiguous expression. He has a smile on his lips, but still the same cold gaze as usual.

"Um… But anyway, she looked well."

"…"

“Aren’t you relieved you got to chat and see that she’s healthy?”

I call out to my teacher who’s still staring off into the distance even though you can’t see Minami-san anymore. He doesn’t seem to hear me. I move to the shade to avoid the sun. A mirage can be seen wavering off in the distance, across the sports grounds.

“Uh… Isozaki-sensei?”

“Well, it’s better to take stories from those girls with a grain of salt.”

“Huh?”

He suddenly takes off the bandana covering his head, and straightens out his hair with his fingers.

“Ever since we discovered Futaba’s corpse, I’ve been wanting to help Minami and Hitoe in some way, but they don’t want it. I’m not part of their world.”

Their world - a world created by those three girls who were like sisters. A world nobody else could understand. The thread that ties them together is all tangled up, so that no matter how much they struggle, they’ll never be completely free of each other.

“I don’t want an apology, I just want to know how those two really feel. I’m not sure if I really saved them from Hanabusa.”

“Sensei…”

“Ugh… I hate this. I wish there was nothing in this world but me and flowers.

He spills his thoughts with a big sigh, looking at the flower bed. I notice a bumblebee buzzing around the flowers with a big ball of pollen on her leg. Isozaki-sensei notices it too, and smiles just a bit.

“Even if a world like that would be beautiful, the flowers wouldn’t bloom. The world needs ugly, smelly, and dirty things to keep going. It’d be a mistake to think something shouldn’t exist just because I don’t like it. Hanabusa must not know that,” he says, turning to the foxglove that’s blooming in the shade.

He seems like a good match for that flower - beautiful, but poisonous. I’m pretty worn out after hearing about the foxglove. I can’t wait to go home. It’s the safest place to be, next to the Kujo house. My mom told me that Utsumi-san has been patrolling the neighbourhood recently, since there’s been some burglaries.

“Maybe we should get a guard dog. I wish she’d come home so she could protect the house again.”

My mom says to me while I’m taking my shoes off in the entrance. I don’t know how to respond. I haven’t told my mom about how Wolf was killed yet.

I bring my bag up to my room, lay down on my futon, and cry. I don’t want to worry my mom by crying in front of her, but I’m not strong enough to hold it back. It was only for a short time, but she was my beloved pet. She took a piece of my soul with her when she died. There’s still a hole left in my heart. I could search for my whole life, but still find nothing that could ever fill it. It could only be healed if I could see Wolf again.

After I calm down a bit, I get out of bed and change out of my uniform. I put my uniform on a hanger, and spray it with some disinfectant that my mom gave me, but I suddenly hear the noise of paper rustling.

“Hm?”

There’s a scrap of paper that I don’t recognize. It’s a plain, simple piece of notebook paper. It’s been folded four times. I wonder what it is? I casually open it up.

“Be careful.”

“…”

A warning, written in graceful, unfamiliar handwriting. I don’t know who wrote it, or why, but it definitely fell out of the pocket of my blazer.

“How did this get here…”

I get goosebumps across my whole body. Of course, it’s always possible that it got into my pocket by accident. Maybe the person who wrote it mistook me for someone else. No, that doesn’t sound very likely. But I can’t deny the possibility that it’s a prank. I don’t know what the intention behind this note is. Maybe it’s just a warning to be cautious, rather than trying to scare me, but on the other hand, they didn’t advise me to do anything in particular. What am I supposed to be careful of? The only person who comes to mind who might have given this to me is…. Minami-san. Suddenly, the door slams open while I’m looking at the note.

“Wah!”

“Oh, you’re in here? You were so quiet that I couldn’t tell. You haven't changed yet?”

“Wh- Mom! Knock before you come into my room!”

“But I didn’t think you were in here!”

My mom comes into my room. She scared me so badly, my heart is pounding.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!”

“Really? Well, whatever. Hurry up and get changed, dinner’s ready. You need to get the hot plate out.”

My mom continues talking, ignoring how suspicious I’m acting. I quickly stuff the note in my desk drawer and out on the chino pants I have hanging up.

“What are we having? Yakisoba? Okonomiyaki?”

“I got the ingredients for jingisukan earlier,” my mom says happily.

“We’re having it again? Aren’t you worried about the smell?”

“If I was worried about the smell, we’d never eat it. I figured it was okay, since it’s a day off tomorrow. It’s not like you’re going on a date or anything.”

She’s right, though. I’m not going on a date. As much as I try to resist, there’s no escaping the allure of jingisukan. We really must be related. I inherited my gluttony from my mom. No, now that I think about it, my maternal grandma likes to eat, too. I’ve even heard that she agreed to marry my grandpa because he’s good at cooking. Of course my grandpa likes delicious food, as well. It’s hereditary. It’s inevitable. There’s no avoiding following your instincts.

“…I’ll make some pumpkin dumplings, too, since we have some frozen. We can use up some of the alpine leeks in soy sauce, too.”

“Sounds good, let’s have that.”

My mom giggles as she heads back to the kitchen. I follow after her, and decide to forget about the note for now. I don’t want to think about scary things, I just want to forget. I’m still too weak right now.

Part 2

However, eating jingisukan in the living room turns into a major catastrophe. I'd even go so far as to say it's barbaric… Well, I still do it from time to time, though.

"Young master, you had jingisukan yesterday, didn't you?"

"Ahaha, I figured you'd notice."

The expert detective, gran, can easily tell what I had for dinner when I visit the Kujo residence the next day. Even if you open a window, turn on an air purifier, or spray a bunch of deodorant after eating it, the rich, greasy scent of sheep fat will stick to you and your clothes. So why would you eat it? The only thing I can say to that is "because it's jingisukan!" There's tender lamb, and umami rich, filling mutton. The spicy ginger works well in the sweet marinade. It's so good that my mom and I don't have to worry about getting tired of eating it all the time, even if there isn't really enough meat for two people.

"It smells, but it's mutton, after all."

"I like having bean sprouts and onions soaked in the meat drippings. It's exceptional when you make yaki udon with the leftovers. The young lady doesn't like it, though."

Gran lets out a disappointed sigh. Sakurako-san isn't big on meat.

"I don't mind if you want to eat it alone. But sheep… perfect timing. Follow me."

"What?"

Sakurako-san has been looking dissatisfied, but she suddenly gets up from her chair. Hector, who has had his nose on my knees begging for a treat, misunderstands and thinks he's going on a walk, so he chases after Sakurako-san.

"We're just going up to the second floor, not on a walk. You wait here," Sakurako-san says, patting his head before inviting me upstairs.

I don't normally go up here, so I'm a bit tense.

"Are we going to the bone room?"

"No, the work room."

"Work room…"

She beckons me to follow her into the large, middle room on the second floor.

"It's my grandpa's study," she explains concisely.

There reference books and other technical books lined up on the bookshelves. On the desk by the windows there's tweezers, amongst other tools for removing bones set out neatly. It's a scholarly room, like Sakurako-san's. The only thing that appears to be a decoration in this dimly lit room is a gold coloured jewelry box. No, maybe it's a music box? It's an antique music box that I saw for sale at the music box store in Hakodate. I'm pretty sure it was made of an antimony alloy. However, what draws my eye isn't the music box.

"Wow… It's rare to see someone assemble one this big."

"Yeah. It was a request by an educational institute to use as teaching materials."

There's a magnificent skeletal specimen standing at about 1 meter tall in the centre of the room. There's 4 large, dark, curved horns on the skull.

"It's a Jacob sheep. It's a very old breed that gets its name from the Book of Genesis."

"Woah! Now that I think about it, I saw one on a field trip to Shibetsu in elementary school. They have such incredible horns!"

I accidentally shout in excitement. Unlike the small specimens I'm used to, seeing such a large, complete specimen is so amazing that I can't contain my excitement. Sakurako-san looks satisfied, too. Now that I think about it, why am I getting so excited about a skeletal specimen like this? Have I been influenced by her?

"Sheep look so round from the outside, but even their bones are kind of rounded. Even though they're both mammals, it's so different from a dog-"

Sheep and goats are both in the order Artiodactyla. There's even larger members, like the giraffe. Sawa-san, a keeper at the Asahiyama zoo, told me about that when we were at the giraffe enclosure. I remember it because I was surprised to hear that such huge animals with long legs have the same structure as goats. Giraffe knees aren't actually knees, either. It's their heel. In that case, are sheep knees actually heels, too? But unlike a giraffe, this sheep doesn't look too different from a dog at a glance. Right, if this were a dog-

"…"

My train of thought comes to a sudden halt. Dog bones… Wolf's bones… Wolf was hurt and killed by Hanabusa's hand. I wonder where her bones are now? I'd at least like to mourn her… I loved Wolf. Even if it was her skeleton, I wish I had a piece of her to keep around, so I could feel like she was still with me. Even as a skeletal specimen.

"Boy…"

I try to hold back my tears, then Sakurako-san suddenly hands me some tissues.

"Aw, don't cry… I know! If you feel like you're going to cry, call Hector. He might not be a qualified therapy dog, but he's gentle and smart. And best of all, he loves you a lot. Also, if you look into the eyes of a dog you trust, your brain releases oxytocin. Petting works, too. Oxytocin reduces stress, and helps you relax. You're an emotional person, full of curiosity, and you place a lot of trust in other people. In other works, you probably have naturally high oxytocin. Isn't that wonderful? Oh, why don't we ask gran to make some sweets? Uhh, what else…"

"…I'm fine."

I can't help but laugh at how she's frantically coming up with suggestions like she's trying to soothe a crying toddler.

"Are you really?" She smiles with relief.

I'm simply happy that she was worried about me. I always feel like I'm "taking care of her," since she's so innocent, defenseless, and always causing trouble. She knows a lot of facts, but she's far too naive for her age. That's why I don't like that she always calls me "boy." But lately, I've changed my thinking about that. After all, I am still a child. A helpless kid. I always thought I was protecting her, but I'm ultimately still just a "boy" that's been protected by all the nice people around me. That's why I want to grow up as fast as I can. I want to be a strong person. I want to be able to smile, no matter what happens.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

I'm fine as long as I'm with her.

"…Then let's do some fortune telling as a distraction."

"Fortune telling?"

"Yeah."

She heads toward the music box with a mischievous expression. It seems to be a small accessory case. There's no music when she lifts the lid.

"It's a keepsake from my aunt. It's broken, so it doesn't play music anymore," she says.

“It’s a little strange hearing you talk about fortune telling, Sakurako-san.”

“Well, I don’t actually believe in it. My uncle taught me about it before. Do you like things like this, too?”

“What is this?”

She takes a small, white piece of something about the size of the first joint of a finger out of a felt pouch. Needless to say, it’s a 4 sided bone fragment that she’s setting out on the desk.

“It’s called Shagai. It’s a Mongolian custom. It’s used for divination or entertainment.”

“Shagai…”

The square piece of bone looks like a squashed fava bean.

“This is a sheep’s talus,” Sakurako-san says.

“It’s said that the Lydians brought the astragalus bones to Greece while crossing the Silk Road during the BC era. I’ve read that the Japanese bean bag juggling game came from the same origin.”

“So it’s related to bean bag juggling, then?”

It seems to have been adapted into various other games, like ohajiki and sugoroku. Fortune telling is said to be the first use for it.

“Each side has a name. Goat, horse, sheep, and camel… You shake them in your hands then toss them like dice, and the side that comes up has a meaning.”

“That’s pretty interesting.”

“Give it a try.”

I tumble the Shagai around in my palms. I roll them out on the table, just as I was told to. There’s a flat side, a side that bulges in the middle, and two sides that look like figure eights.

“A horse, a sheep, and two camels, huh…” Sakurako-san says, raising one eyebrow.

“What does it mean?

“Hm…”

Rather than tell me the result, she just snorts and folds her arms.

“…Is it bad?”

“Well, something like that. It’s an unfortunate roll, but it’s not like it has any real significance. It’s simply a question of probability. The sides aren’t all flat like with dice, and the shape can differ.”

“I see…”

Sakurako-san speaks quickly while putting the Shagai back in the pouch, so I know she’s trying to deceive me. I feel like I can’t say anything, though. I know she’s trying to cheer me up, so it wouldn’t do any good to say anything about it.

“Oh well. Back to the main topic at hand. There’s another kind of Shagai that’s made from a piece of a wolf, rather than a sheep.”

“A wolf?”

“Yeah. Wolves are extremely intelligent. It probably comes from the idea that it’s hard to catch a wolf unless you have good luck. It’s a good luck charm. It’s called a Choni Shagai.”

Sakurako-san returns the pouch to the music box, then turns to me with the bookshelves to her back.

“And if you’re clever, you can take someone else’s good luck if you ‘steal’ the Shagai from its owner.”

“Steal it?”

That sounds kind of bad to do. Stealing someone else's fortune for yourself… I wonder if it's really that easy for a person to become happy.

"It seems that if you want to share your good fortune with someone close to you, you let them steal it on purpose."

"In that case, it sounds like a nice story."

Sakurako-san narrows her eyes as she closes the lid of the music box while telling me about how they sell Shagai in souvenir shops nowadays.

"It used to belong to my uncle. Since the charm only works for men, it doesn't make sense for me to have it… Well, I'll just leave the wolf bone here and get back to work for today. I have a specimen I've been asked to make. You already walked Hector, right? You can go home for today, then."

"Huh? But if you have some work to do, I can help you— Ah,"

I start to speak, but then I notice Sakurako-san's meaningful gaze.

"…Before I move on to my work, I think I'll have a cup of gran's tea. I'll head down first, so you can take a closer look at the sheep specimen if you'd like."

"Alright."

Sakurako-san smiles, and I finally understand what she's implying. She quietly leaves the room, and leaves me standing in front of the bookshelf. There's an old fashioned, dark grey music box. The lid is glass, but as I go to look inside I'm startled.

"…Ngh!"

My breath catches in my throat as I see a golden butterfly spreading its tiny wings in the small space next to the accessory box. When I think about it, butterflies aren't exactly an uncommon motif. Apparently when you turn the handle, the butterfly's wings are supposed to open and close with the music.

Thinking about it objectively, it's a very lovely music box. It's a memento of her aunt that's passed away, so she probably treasures it. I carefully open the music box with both hands, and look down at the pieces of bone inside the felt pouch. The wolf bone looks like the leg joints from a plastic model robot. Every time I see the bones of a living creature so delicately and logically put together, I think about Sakurako-san. The wolf bones have been thoroughly degreased, but not bleached, so they have a natural, gentle colour. I gently pick them up and put them in my pocket. Having a bone as a good luck charm is very Sakurako-san-ish. When I head downstairs, Hector comes to greet me. Sakurako-san peeks out from behind him.

"Are you leaving? Be careful on your way home."

"Thanks, I will… But is this really okay? You must treasure them, since-"

"What are you talking about? They were stolen. It's neither good, nor bad. I simply don't have them anymore."

There's nothing more for me to say. Sakurako-san puts her finger to her lips with a mischievous grin. I nod, pat Hector's head, then head out the door.

My chest feels warm. Wolf bones she got from her uncle must have been priceless treasures to her. I'm touched that she gave me something so important. I'm still torn up about Wolf, especially with Hanabusa's shadow looming over me. It's like the sound of distant thunder. You know it's going to rain, but there's nowhere to escape to, but there's people I can call to bring me an umbrella. I don't want to be the one being protected all the time, so I have to get strong and smart enough to fight back. Starting now-

I suddenly get a notification on my phone. It's a message on a social media app. I figure it's probably Azechi or someone, so I push my bike to the side of the path and lean against it. Once the app starts up, I nearly knock my bike over in surprise.

Phantom: I want to talk to you directly.

My blood runs cold. All kinds of thoughts swirl around in my head. I have to tell Sakurako-san. I want to know what happened to Wolf. I want her bones back.

"What's wrong?" An old woman that was passing by asks me.

She scared me so bad, I almost dropped my phone. I must have been looking distraught at my phone or something.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh, yeah… I'm fine."

The old lady is pushing a shopping basket, looking at me with concern. I recognize her from when we were dealing with the circular notice problem before. She's Asada-san, a woman who is around 90 years old.

"Umm… Were you out shopping today? How are you feeling?"

"I'm doing well, since it's warm out. I borrowed a book from the library today."

"Oh, that's nice."

I try to keep my voice from trembling, so she doesn't worry about me. She smiles, bows, and starts pushing her cart again. For a second, I was worried she was a spy. She might have been trying to get information from me without me realizing it. I have to remind myself that for every danger in the world, there's also something harmless that needs to be protected. If I don't stand up for myself and deal with this properly, the people close to me might get hurt.

"I understand. What should I do?"

Unlike texts, the only trace of a phone call is in the call history, but it can also be recorded. I reply to Phantom and ready myself to start recording at any moment. After a few minutes, I get a reply. It's in the form of a voice call, rather than a text. I take a deep breath to prepare myself, then pick up the call. I don't know if it's the stress, or the warm wind, but there's sweat dripping down my back.

"…Hello?"

"Hey, boy."

"…"

It's the first time I've felt so disgusted by being called a boy. Sometimes people imitate Sakurako-san by calling me boy, too, but it's never felt so uncomfortable like it does now. I think the discomfort comes from the voice that's saying it, rather than the word "boy."

"So what do you want?"

"Is there any reason I'd call you other than to talk?"

“In that case, why are you using an artificial voice? It’s cowardly to hide like that.”

There’s even been variety shows lately where the host is just an artificial voice. It sounds quite similar to a real person, and the pronunciation is pretty close, too. It makes people in Hokkaido whose accent emphasizes the first syllable uncomfortable, though.

“Why are you assuming I’m a coward? Has it occurred to you that I might be unable to speak? For example, if I had an incurable disease?”

“Huh?”

For a brief moment, an impossible culprit comes to mind. The person who is least likely to be Phantom.

“T-there’s no way…”

“I was lying. I was just trying to stand up for myself, just like you.” There’s a moment of silence before the robotic voice replies (probably because he was laughing at me).

“Why are you involving us in this?!” I yell in a burst of anger.

“It’s not a good idea to shout so loudly. I can tell how much your heart is quivering. Emotional people are easy to control. The heart is beneath the lungs and ribs. It’s better if you gently hide it.”

I take a deep breath and suppress my anger. Come to think of it, I’m in the middle of the road. I can’t just stand here and talk just because not many cars come through here, and more importantly, I’m too noticeable here.

“…Why are you involving me in this?”

I have to move. I look around and think about going back to the Kujo house.

“The Nagayama shrine,” Phantom says.

“Huh?”

“It’s dangerous to talk while pushing your bike. You should talk in a safer place. I don’t intend to have you get hurt.”

“You don’t want to hurt me?”

“That’s right. I only hurt criminals. As long as you’re good, I won’t kill you. That’s my rule.”

“…”

I can’t tell their true intentions from the emotionless voice. Is it true, or are they lying? I can’t believe anything this person says in the first place. Another alarm bell goes off in my mind. I can’t handle this on my own. I need someone- Right, I can rely on Sakurako-san and the police. But at the same time, my shallow sense of self respect makes itself known and causes me to wonder if it’s really okay to just run away. If I mess up trying to call for help, this valuable thread connecting Hanabusa and I may get severed. Even though Sakurako-san is so wise, she tends to run wild and not check her surroundings. I have to be careful, get a firm grasp on the situation, and stay calm…

“Okay. I’ll move. Can I end the call for a moment?”

“Are you going to call for help? That would be a problem, so let’s keep chatting. I can keep my identity hidden during casual conversation.”

I’m sure they’re making fun of me behind the phone, but they’re right, I can’t argue. If I get emotional while replying I’ll just be doing what they expect. I put my phone between my shoulder and my ear, and start to pedal my bike. I do as they say, and head to Nagayama shrine.

Part 3

Our conversation starts off harmless, just talking about the weather. The weather is nice today. I look up at the clear, cloudless sky. I'll look up where else has sunny weather later. However, the person on the other end of the line knows where I am. They could have just looked at the weather forecast for Asahikawa and seen it would be nice here. Speaking of which, how did he know I was near the shrine? A chill runs down my spine. Even though I got a bit of a sunburn on my neck, it feels like my body is ice cold.

"Oh right, did you like my picture?"

"…"

My heart sinks. I safely cross the street and enter the shrine grounds.

"She was a truly beautiful dog."

I don't respond. Fear and anger well up inside of me, causing me to tremble.

"I tried my best, but I couldn't save her. It seemed like she was looking for you until the very end."

"Huh?"

"I showed her a picture of you, and she snuggled up to it as she took her dying breath."

"The… The way you're talking sounds like you're expecting me to thank you!"

I unintentionally start yelling in anger again. I feel dizzy just remembering that picture.

"I can hear the anger in your voice. Try to calm down, and control your emotions. I'm not trying to get you to thank me. I simply couldn't forgive what happened to her. She was very smart. Her eyes reminded me of Kujo's. I wanted to save her if I could."

Of course, there's many reasons why I loved Wolf. There were lots of cute parts of her, but her wise and aloof side is what I loved most. She reminded me of Sakurako-san. The way she turned away when I tried to pet her is just like how I can never get close to Sakurako-san. It made me love her even more. I'm unsettled that Phantom saw the same thing in her. It feels like he trampled over my memories of her. But at the same time, I'm proud that he was impressed by Wolf. She was a stunning dog, and at least as cute as Hector.

"I wanted to return her to you alive, for her sake. I was reluctant to send you a picture instead of her living form. I'm sorry, I wasn't enough."

That emotionless, robotic voice just sounds insincere, no matter what he's trying to say. I grip the handle bar of my bike as tight as I can. I stagger toward the nearest bench. I feel nauseated.

"No, don't apologize… I don't believe you in the first place."

"But that's how I truly feel. I thought you'd understand me better by now."

"Then tell me the truth already, why are you getting me involved in this?!"

I stumble along as I park my bike. My anger has come back in full force. My knuckles turn white from squeezing the handlebars of my bike as I push it.

"I'd like to turn your question around, then. Is there any way I can explain to you that would make you believe me?"

"W-well…"

I can't find any faults in what they've said, but it's the truth. Even a lie can be proven. There's no way to truly prove something - Sakurako-san said that before. No matter what they say, I can't believe Phantom. I bite my lower lip in frustration.

"Well, whatever. No matter what proof I give, you won't be convinced. But today, I want you to cooperate. You can decline if you'd like, but you already know what I'm fighting for, don't you?"

This conversation is going to be long, so I park my bike next to a bench at the shrine and sit down. Fortunately, there's no other visitors. A quick dragonfly rests on the tall grass by the edge of the pond. I think it's a kind of cattail or something? It's a quiet place. I'm probably talking to a serial killer, though. That pond is so full of life, with dragonflies zipping about and small frogs croaking. It's the same spot where the body of Sakurako-san's younger brother, Soutarou-kun, was found. The line between stillness and motion, or the ordinary and the extraordinary, is vague. The line between good and evil is probably fuzzy, too.

"Do you really believe that you're justified in killing people? How could murder not be evil?"

"I don't think I'm good, but I do believe that there's two types of people in the world. There's weak butterflies who need help from humans to spread their wings, and there's butterflies who spread their wings alone. Both are capable of flying, and taking a human life."

"Which kind are you?"

"I don't have wings. I'm just an ugly caterpillar that crawls on the ground, same as you."

Then does that mean Sakurako-san, who they called a butterfly, could take someone's life?

"But we can help others emerge and spread their wings. Then we can use them as an example."

"An example…"

"That's just how I chose to put it. Those are my words, not yours. But you know it, don't you? You know how butterflies are first hand, don't you?"

"But you're not morally right!"

"You're just forcing your own justice onto the rest of the world."

"I'm not forcing it. At the very least, death hurts other peoples' hearts. The people left behind are left to grieve."

"…"

Is the silence from the other end hesitation, or are they laughing at me?

"Very well, then. Let's check, then. We'll make it a game. It doesn't matter if you don't like it. If you refuse, innocent people will die."

"I thought you only hurt bad people!"

"Control your emotions, boy. Our conversation was going so well, and now you ruined it… Oh well. I don't hurt people, I only help those who need it. What I want is for you to save a certain girl from death."

"Who is this girl?"

I try to listen closely while I swat at the bugs buzzing in my ears. I'm angry that I'm being forced into this.

“There are three rules. Follow the instructions, don’t talk to the white butterfly, Kujo, about it, and listen to what your own beliefs are telling you. You may have to perform misdemeanours, but I promise not to make you hurt anyone.”

They called Sakurako-san a “white butterfly.” A snow Apollo. A northern butterfly with translucent, white wings. They called her that before, too.

“But then…”

Wouldn’t that make me like an agent of their justice?

“I can’t say for certain that you won’t be in any danger. Use plenty of caution, but remember that I’m watching over you, as well.”

Confusion, doubt, fear - various emotions rush through me. Am I stuck in their trap? I don’t see how there’s much benefit for them by trapping me like this. If they want to help people, why do I have to do it? But what’s really worrying me is that there’s a life at risk. Is there really a woman in danger?

“…Have you decided on an answer, boy?”

They really sound like Sakurako-san when they say that. Maybe they’re just trying to throw me off with it. To make me obey. Feelings of disgust well up inside of me. I can’t follow their orders like that.

“I… There’s nothing in it for me. I won’t obey you.” I give my response clearly. I controlled my emotions.

As much as I hate to admit it, they were right when they said I’m at a disadvantage by getting emotional. I gaze at my surroundings to keep myself calm. The shrine grounds are quiet.

“Well done, not showing your emotions. It always makes your opponent feel like you have the upper hand. Unfortunately, though, you can’t refuse to participate in this game.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t escape now that you’ve been told that a life is at stake. You’ve seen so many peoples’ sorrows caused by a single death. You can’t overlook a life that you’re able to save.”

Inside of my stomach feels cold. I recall the hot summer night when Ii-chan’s mother was killed. The scent of blood. The scent of death. The heat of that summer and that terrifying scent suddenly come back to my nose. I’ve encountered so many corpses and so many bones up until now. So many families that have lost loved ones. I think about it all the time. What if I had noticed a bit sooner? What if I could have stopped them before a life was lost? So many corpses lie at my feet, grabbing at them. However, that doesn’t mean I have the courage to jump into danger. Not to mention that I’d have to obey Phantom.

“You’re overestimating me. I’m not a good enough person to put my life at risk for someone I don’t even know. Therefore, I can’t do as you ask.”

This is my chance. I suppress the trembling and desperation in my voice.

“So please give me more of a reward. If I save that girl, promise me that you won’t involve yourself with Sakurako-san anymore. Never contact her again.”

I don’t want to be manipulated by Phantom anymore. I racked my brain to come up with a bargaining chip. My hand that’s holding my phone is covered in sweat.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to. I never trusted you to begin with. Even if you say there’s a human life at stake, it’s not like there’s any proof for me to believe you. If you won’t agree, I can just hang up.”

I force myself to speak in a flat tone, to hide my emotions as much as I possibly can. Phantom stays silent for a while. I wonder if they're thinking of how to answer, or maybe they're angry? Maybe they already hung up on me.

"Fine, then. I promise. If you can save the girl alone, you win," Phantom tells me clearly.

"Really?!"

I guess they didn't hang up on me, after all. I wanted to keep my voice flat, but I couldn't help it with how happy I am. I quickly follow up by saying, "well, it's only fair." I'm sure they're laughing at me this time.

"But she's a butterfly. The original butterfly. She dances on the line between spring and summer, a spring ephemeral. What could caterpillars crawling along the ground do for her? She always does whatever she wants, when she wants."

A spring ephemeral, a plant that announces spring. But Sakurako-san is different. She's nothing dangerous like that. She has a strong, unshakable will.

"I'll send you the dog bones, if you feel you need them now."

"…Really?"

"As long as you're good, and don't lie to me. That hasn't always been the case. You just misunderstood, though. Well, I didn't correct you, so I can't blame you."

Phantom always speaks the truth. It's true, so I shouldn't be angry about it, but I wish I wasn't completely at their mercy.

"Then what should I start with?"

They're carefully watching over me and making me into their puppet. With that in mind, I wait for my instructions. I have to save that woman, even if it means wagging my tail for Phantom.

"I want you to visit this website."

Phantom sends me an email. I click the link in it.

"…What is this?"

"It's a social media page for reporting criminal activity or victims."

It's one of those big, long forum threads. Each post is about things like posts online about a crime that's been committed, or victims talking about domestic abuse they've suffered.

"So there's a site like this…"

In recent years there's been people who get up to mischief online, brigading, doxxing and flaming people. I've stumbled upon videos of real violence. They make me feel sick.

"Posts on there have led to the arrest of actual criminals before. It's one of the ways I monitor and search for my targets."

"But if you kill criminals, doesn't that just make you a criminal, too?"

"I won't deny that. I don't exclusively kill criminals, though. Sometimes I can save people without killing anyone. I only kill when someone will die if I don't. Only criminals and their associates are killed. It's like when snakes eat each other. Like that large, dark snake, I'm just feeding."

I immediately realize they're implying they know about Mikimoto-san's melanistic Japanese striped snake. Hanabusa was involved in that case, after all.

"Then what am I—"

As I scroll through the thread, a word suddenly catches my eye in a recent post.

My relative in Asahikawa committed suicide, and seemed to be using a suicide site. Apparently they were burning charcoal with friends that their family doesn't know, so it's hard for the police to investigate it. That kind of website isn't restricted yet.

Even if it's regulated, won't more just pop up?

There's a ton of them out there. This one is for Hokkaido only: ttp://***

"Suicide site…"

I go to the URL in the post. The home page just says "Hokkaido Board" in a red font on a black background. There's countless posts like "Decision in Sapporo", "Tomorrow I'm traveling to Wakkanai", and "Looking for company [Kushiro area]".

"…"

Then, at the top I see the words "Recruiting in Asahikawa".

"Should I be looking for someone planning to commit suicide in Asahikawa?"

"No. I already contacted them in advance. You'll pretend to be me. We decided to meet tonight in one hour. You applied to join a group that wants to commit suicide."

"What?! I… I can't do that!"

I almost drop my phone.

"Don't tell them to stop. As I said at the beginning, I only want you to scoop up 'her'."

"…"

I gulp. Is this really going to be okay? The arranged meeting time is in an hour, and they're planning to commit group suicide tonight. There's no time for hesitation. I have no choice but to go there and stop "her" death.

"Where is the meeting place, then?"

I stare up at the sky to resolve myself a little past noon.

Part 4

Phantom specifies that the meeting point is near Asahikawa Station. There's a small tea shop in the department store.

"Do you have a reservation?"

The greeter calls out to me. This tea shop has a slightly different atmosphere than the one I normally go to, so I feel out of place somehow.

"Oh, uh…"

Oh geez. I can't answer because I don't even know who I'm meeting with. I'm flustered and panicking, but the clerk patiently guides me. Apparently it's not a busy time, so there's only one group of customers with an appointment right now.

In the corner near the information desk, there's a lone woman- no, a girl about the same age as me, sitting in front of a glass of iced tea. Her face is beautiful in profile. She has

distinctive features. Her silky, jet-black hair reaches down to her upper arms. There's moles on the back of her pale, slender neck. She's strangely bewitching.

"Nazuna… san?" I timidly ask for confirmation.

She gives a single, quick nod, then looks at me with tense eyes. Maybe it's because of her light makeup, but she looks very mature. She urges me to sit in an empty seat.

"Um… Nice to meet you."

I don't really know what to say, so I decide to start with a greeting. She finally gives me a smile. She still looks tense, though. She drops her gaze, so we don't make much eye contact. It's only natural in this situation. After all, we're about to die.

"Let's wait here for a little while." I say, since I can't stand the silence anymore. I order an iced tea, too.

She nods, but doesn't say anything. Phantom was the one messaging her before. It feels so wrong to pretend to be Phantom, but I just have to focus on this girl for now.

Nazuna-san is in her third year of high school. She wanted to pursue higher education, but she had to give up because her father passed away. Now she's helping as an office worker at her relative's company while also attending school. Working there is hard for her, since she's an introvert, so her aunt and uncle pester her constantly about it. She can't complain to her mom, since her relatives gave her work so she doesn't go hungry, but she feels sick every time she has to go to work. If she tries to argue back, she won't be allowed to go back to high school. Their words and actions have been escalating, and now she's being treated badly by everyone in the company. She even sent a picture of a fresh bruise they gave her. And so, she decided she wanted to die. She feels like she has no other choice. She thinks that since she isn't good at talking to other people, she doesn't have a future, even if she does get away from her current situation. So she thinks she has no choice. If she's dead, it's an easy escape. It's the only place she can escape to…

The person who said all that is now sitting right in front of me. I want to refute all the bad things she thinks about herself, but I can't find the words. I'm supposed to be like a spy. I have a feeling like she doesn't really want to kill herself.

"Umm… Do you want to order something? Like cake?" She doesn't respond.

She looks troubled as she stares at my untouched glass of iced tea. I didn't understand the meaning of that expression at first. She's confused by me, too. Eventually, she speaks up.

"You… Shouldn't eat right now."

"Oh! Yeah, you're right… Sorry for saying something weird."

If you eat or drink before committing suicide, your corpse will be dirty. She gives me a modest smile. At least she doesn't suspect that I'm a spy. Eventually, I stop trying to make conversation. I sense that she doesn't really want to go through with this, but I decide to pretend to be as gloomy as I can. We wait in silence for the other members to arrive. Even though the shop is pretty quiet, there's two women sitting nearby who are laughing and talking loudly. It makes me feel uncomfortable.

When I look over, Nazuna-san also has her brow furrowed. She seems even more uncomfortable with their laughter than I am.

"Should we go wait outside the store?" I ask, but she shakes her head no with a bitter smile.

Isn't she too thin? Maybe it's because she's so pretty, or because she isn't speaking much, but she feels dangerously fragile. I absolutely don't want her to die.

"Is she the one I have to save?" I messaged Phantom to ask, but I didn't get a response no matter how long I waited.

Does it mean I have to figure it out for myself? I want to protect her if I can. Sakurako-san is the type that doesn't talk much unless she's interested, too. Kougami is a quiet girl, as well. She's the type that just agrees with what others are saying rather than talking about herself. However, both of them feel like they have a solid bone in the center of their bodies. Like an unwavering core. Nazuna-san doesn't seem like she has one, though. It's like even reaching out a hand to her could cause her to break.

"Um… Actually, I think we should—"

"Ah! There you are! Hello!"

"It's just the two of you so far?"

While I'm about to discourage her from committing suicide, and suggest we run away together… The voices of two women interrupt me.

"You're Nazuna-chan and Tatewaki-kun, right? I'm @Mikarinko. This is Kasumi-chan."

"Oh… H-Hi…"

She speaks with such a bright voice that you wouldn't think she wants to commit suicide. She looks like she's the same age as Sakurako-san, or maybe a little older. She has light cream hair, and green eyes that look like they might be coloured contacts. However, the real reason I find myself speechless is because she's wearing the same Lolita fashion as Azechi. But unlike Azechi, @Mikarinko-san's clothes don't really suit her age. It's like… the pure white dress she's wearing is too cute. It reminds me of a wedding, or the clothes a corpse would wear at a funeral. I'm not in a position to judge what other people wear or anything, but is that really what she wants to die in?

"What's this? Didn't I say I'm a sweet little loli in advance? Lolita clothes are expensive, even though they originated a long time ago."

"Mika-san has a youthful face, so it really suits you."

Kasumi-san is a girl with a small build, standing next to Mika-san. She's wearing a blazer-type school uniform, which I think belongs to an all girl's school nearby. She looks very young, probably because of her doll-like haircut. She's too young to decide she wants to die. She's only about 150cm tall. She has an air about her that makes her seem like she's from a well off family. Above all, they both smell nice. Mika-san smells like flowers, whereas Kasumi-san smells like fruit.

"You surprised me. I expected Tatewaki-kun to look scarier," Kasumi-san suddenly says with a twinkle in her eye.

"Huh?"

"You're right. How old are you? From your messages, I thought you'd be in university, or a working adult."

"Umm… I'm in my second year of high school." I say with embarrassment. They both look at each other.

I wonder what Phantom said to these girls.

"That makes you older than me."

“Kasumi-chan looks like a middle schooler. Oh, but don’t ask my age. The only answer you’ll get is 16,” @Mikarinko-san says as she sits down next to Nazuna-san.

Nazuna-san looks anxious from how talkative those two are, and curls up in a ball. To be honest, those two don’t seem suicidal at all, but now that I think about it, the strange tension in the air between them is probably from the fear of dying.

“Oh, Kohe-san has the car parked in front of the station. Shun-san is going there directly.”

The two of them order some tea, then Kasumi-san starts looking at her emails.

“Well, let’s head over there.”

The oldest one out of us, @Mikarinko-san the self-proclaimed 16 year old, pays for all of us. I thank her, but she just shrugs and says, “it’s not like I’ll use it anymore, anyway.” I don’t know if that’s supposed to be a joke, but it’s not funny. I have no idea how to respond to her. We get onto the glass elevator and start heading down to where the station is. While we’re waiting, she gets a sad, ponderous look on her face.

“The area by the station has completely changed. When the hotel next to it got taken down, I almost cried, but maybe it was a good thing.”

They’ve recently been redeveloping the area by the station. It used to have a lonely atmosphere about it, but now it’s always lively and bustling.

“I liked it before, too, though,” Kasumi-san murmurs.

Nobody denies it. I feel the same way. There’s no denying that things will change. Being lively is a really great thing, but it’s kind of sad seeing the scenery you’re used to change. That sadness seems to symbolize us now. Unable to adapt with the constant flow of everyday life and the passage of time. It feels like we’re going to drown- no, that’s not it. I’m not. I’m different from these girls. I’m not planning to commit suicide.

As soon as we leave the department store and head for the station, I immediately feel anxious. An hour ago, I was worried about how to save and prevent “her” from committing suicide. Somehow, talking to them like this is making me scared that I’m going to be trapped by the desire for death. I impulsively send Phantom an email saying “This is impossible for me, after all.”

I’m terrified. However, as soon as I send it, I realize my mistake. I’m showing weakness.

“It’s not impossible. Your defeat is not your death. If you feel like your life is in danger, you can run away.”

“What’s wrong, Tatewaki-kun?”

“N… Nothing.”

Kasumi-chan gives me a worried look because I stopped walking. I didn’t expect Phantom to say that to me, though.

“Keep it up a little longer,” Phantom says. It makes me feel kind of irritated.

Being told not to run away makes me want to do it even more. Maybe that rebellious feeling is proof I’m still a child.

“I’m watching over you. I consulted you about this because I believe that you’re up to the task,” Phantom says in another message.

I’m being watched by a serial killer. That doesn’t make me feel better at all. It’s scary. I don’t exactly hate being told that they believe in me, though, but that also means I’d be

betraying their expectations if I fail. That would be frustrating. I'll do my best for now. Above all, this is for Sakurako-san. I will protect her.

I decide to sort through the information Phantom sent me about @Mikarinko-san and Kasumi-chan in my head. @Mikarinko is unlucky, isn't good at anything, and realized she'll never get close to the ideal she's been chasing for her whole life. Kasumi's life has been ruled by her strict parents, to the point where she can't see herself living any longer. I wonder if they've fully considered the value their lives hold, and how much they could accomplish if they didn't give in. I can't help but be suspicious of them. Is there really no other option but death? I can't say it to them out loud, though. That would reveal my identity to them.

It sounds like the two members I haven't met yet are both men, That means the person I'm supposed to protect is one of these three. The question is, which one? Figuring that out should be my first order of business, but even if I figure out who it is, doesn't that mean I'd be leaving the others to die?

We cross the pedestrian bridge in front of the department store, and arrive at the parking lot by the station. There's an older looking camper waiting there. They're taking a camper to go commit suicide? I was surprised at first, but I guess there's no other car that can accommodate this many people.

"If you commit suicide in a rental car, it causes problems for the company, and they'll pester your family about paying for damages. They can't lend out a car that a bunch of people died in, after all," Mika-san says. She adds that she doesn't want to hang herself at home for similar reasons.

I guess having someone die in an apartment would cause problems for both the family of the person involved, and the landlord. I know about that firsthand.

"It's a huge bother to use a train, too. All you have to do is jump into the tracks, but then your death could be tied to an employee's negligence, or someone could be accused of pushing you. You have to be as self-contained as possibly when killing yourself. I don't want to leave behind a mess, either."

I understand where they're coming from, but I feel like they could put all this thought into other things. Like how their families will feel, for example.

"It's my first time in a camper," Kasumi-chan says innocently.

"I was worried it wouldn't run, since I got it secondhand for cheap," Kohe-san, the owner of the camper, explains.

He's a lazy looking man with some slightly stubble. He has a lot of grey hair, so I thought he was elderly at first, but Phantom said he's 43. Apparently he moved out of his house 3 months ago, and he's been living in this camper ever since. It looks like he tidied up the inside of the car, but it still smells faintly of sweat.

When the last member, Shun-san, joins us, everyone becomes much more tense. When we were chatting, the reality of committing group suicide didn't seem as imminent. Even Kasumi-chan and Mika-san are barely talking. Shun-san is in his 20s, with messy hair down to his shoulders. His ripped jeans and sunglasses add to his "wild" look. It seems like one of his legs doesn't work, so he uses crutches.

Everyone is using their usernames. Shun-san is the same, of course. Using the character 隼 read as “Shun” gives the impression of a sharp person, like a falcon. (隼 is usually read as hayabusa, meaning falcon.) He and someone he knows were both hit by a truck, and he wants to die to escape the feeling of guilt over being the one to survive. Like Nazuna-san, he’s quiet and gives off a heavy atmosphere. He also lost an eye due to the accident, but he usually wears sunglasses to hide the artificial one. It makes him feel kind of mysterious. As soon as he showed up, the expressions disappeared from everyone’s faces. He’s not a bad guy or anything. However, he’s like the grim reaper who’s inviting us to the underworld.

“Well, now that we’re all here… I guess it’s time to set off,” Kohe-san finally says, and gets into his seat.

Kohe-san is the driver, and I’m sitting next to Shun-san. Mika-san, Kasumi-san, and Nazuna-san all sit in their seats alone. I’m worried about her sitting alone, but I don’t even know what to say if I sat next to her. Maybe I’ll just keep an eye out. The camper slowly starts to move. Real camping is fun, but our current destination will only bring sadness. If I don’t find “her” soon, I might end up dying, too. However, I feel guilt bubbling up as I think about leaving the others to die. Isn’t it almost the same as murdering them? It’s not easy to say anything to them about their lives, though. So I at least want to save one person.

I wish I at least had a hint about who “she” is. When I ask for at least a bit more information, I’m met with no response. I thought so, I wasn’t expecting one. I’m about to turn my phone off when I suddenly get an email notification that makes my breath catch in my throat.

“Be careful, one of the people in there is a murderer.”

What the hell is this? I didn’t want to hear that.

Part 5

Now that the car is moving, it’s hard for me to move around. At first I was sitting next to Shun-san, but I couldn’t take the silence anymore so I decided to move to the passenger seat. I can see the whole car from here, so it’s two birds with one stone.

“I’ve been thinking of leaving some of my stuff to an acquaintance, so I’ve been working hard for the past half a year with that goal in mind. I hope things will finally get easier now,” Kohe-san says to me.

He left everything behind and travelled around Hokkaido for 3 months.

“Well, when my wife and I got divorced, she took the house after squeezing all the reparations and child support payments she could out of me.” Kohe-san lets out a laugh even though it’s not funny.

“Why did you get divorced?” Kasumi-chan asks without hesitation even though it’s such a tough topic.

Kohe-san shrugs.

“I guess our personalities just… didn’t match up anymore. Honestly, I don’t really understand. I think the problem is that I don’t get it. I wasn’t dissatisfied, but I guess she was,” He says with a smile on his face. He looks like he could cry, though. “We’d been married for 13 years before I suddenly got a letter of divorce. We didn’t want to upset the kids, so we tried to

keep it peaceful. I don't make enough to be treated as an ATM." He mutters about how he should ask how the kids are before he dies.

"But for your wife to divorce you then get remarried after 3 months? It absolutely had to be because of a man. You should've done a background check," Mika-san says sullenly.

"My ex-wife said that he wasn't the reason for the divorce, but I don't care enough to find out if that's true."

"Maybe things would've been different, and you could've gotten custody, or settlement money. You can't even see your kids now, right?" Kohe-san's expression clouds over when Mika-san says that.

"They have phones, so my kids could contact me if they wanted to. Yesterday was my birthday, but I didn't even get a call, so I guess I wasn't a good dad to them. It's just what I deserve," Kohe-san says with a long sigh. "I probably won't even get a call when my daughter gets married in the future. After my ex-wife got remarried, she said I didn't have to pay child support anymore. I can't be a father to my kids, even if it's just paying for them. I have nothing left."

I feel like it's better if he doesn't have to pay anything, but Kohe-san is depressed that he doesn't have any kind of ties to his family. If he can't meet them, it's not like paying child support would have any benefit for him. I wonder if his ex-wife, who took away his sense of responsibility for his kids, realizes that he's going to kill himself tonight?

I look behind me, and see that Kasumi-chan and Mika-san both look very dissatisfied. I wonder if they see the situation differently because they're women. I feel like it's better if I don't say anything. I don't know if Shun-san and Nazuna-san are uninterested, or if they're just pretending to be, since they're both just staring out the window.

"Happiness, huh…" Mika-san mutters. "There's lots of clothes I'd like to buy… When I was happier, I'd go try on clothes all the time, but the shop assistants were always, always younger and prettier than me. Seeing how they looked at me like I was beneath them was the first time I thought, 'ah, I wish I could just crawl in a hole and die,'" Mika-san says, staring at the ground while fiddling with the lace on her shirt.

Kasumi-chan, who is sitting next to her, says, "that's horrible…"

"Ah… No, it's not. What I couldn't stand wasn't the staring, but the feeling behind it. Until now, I didn't care about people looking at me. I thought I was just wearing clothes to make myself feel cute… But we live in a cruel world where the line between 'pathetic' and 'cute' is paper thin." Mika-san sighs. It's the kind of sigh where you can almost hear her hope leaving her. "Whenever I was frustrated or stressed, I thought I could just put on my favourite outfits and feel invincible. But then I finally realized that the world isn't mine for the taking, after all. It's like the magic disappeared." She mutters quietly.

Kasumi-chan's face distorts like she's about to cry. Mika-san has an attachment that I don't. I honestly can't understand how clothes can cause someone to want to die, but I'm sure that they're a big part of her identity. I can understand that. If Sakurako-san didn't have bones, she'd probably lose her way, too.

"That's why I threw away eeeverything. All I have left are the first clothes I bought. I just couldn't throw them away… I had to save up so much money and muster so much courage to buy them. It's the first time my clothes felt like me… They're a bit childish, though."

Mika-san softly, lovingly straightens out each fold in her white dress, one by one. I don't know how many years ago she bought it, but it looks well taken care of.

"I don't think it's childish, you look super cute," I say.

Honestly, I was hesitant about her at first. I think she could tell from looking at me, but now, I don't want to feel sorry for her. I can't. Besides, I can understand her feelings of wanting to stop the flow of time.

"Huh? It's fine, you don't have to flatter me. I already know everyone is laughing at me inside."

"I'm not laughing," Kohe-san says while holding the steering wheel. Shun-san and Nazuna-san also nod.

"Wha…"

"They're right. We won't laugh. I pity anyone who would laugh at someone who is genuinely lovely like you!" Kasumi-chan says clearly, though she looks embarrassed. Mika-san looks troubled and she twirls her hair around her finger while hanging her head.

"…It'd be nice if everyone in the world would say things like that. It's not like I want to be coddled, but if the world were a little kinder, maybe I would feel like I could keep on going just a bit longer-" Mika-san murmurs.

"No, that's not the case," Shun-san objects in a low voice. "That's not how it is. Sometimes kindness is even more cruel. After all, everyone dies anyway," he says while still looking out the window.

His tone sounds stubborn. No, like he's quietly filled with anger. The inside of the car, which had gotten softer, once again falls silent.

"…Well, there's truth to that, as well. After all, society doesn't care about each individual. My point is, lucky people get to live well, but clumsy, awkward people like us are left behind," Kohe-san says, trying to smooth things over.

For just a moment, I notice him glance over at me. I can tell his glance means "you agree, right?" Honestly, I've never thought of the world like that. If anything, I feel like I've been swept away. Sometimes I wonder if I'm even a good person. Though I did meet these people under strange circumstances. I mean, I'm attending their group suicide under orders from a crazed serial killer.

"I ended up going on a trip to see if I could change my way of thinking, or find a reason to live… Those trips to 'find yourself' are a complete sham. There's no destined encounters, or life altering events. The only thing that changed was that the hot spring helped the dry skin on my legs. My only regret is that I wanted to eat some really good shishamo sashimi." Kohe-san laughs.

Shishamo is best in late fall. There aren't many places around here where they live, and they can be hard to catch, so they're considered a delicacy. I remember how soft and delicate it tasted when I had some.

"Well, this is the last trip for all of us." Kasumi-chan says.

Kohe-san laughs again. Once his laughter stops, the car falls completely silent. Everyone here knows that this isn't going to be a nice trip. The car stays silent for a while. Kohe-san focuses on driving, Mika-san plays with the lace on her clothes, Kasumi-chan closes her eyes, and Nasuna-san and Shun-san both watch the scenery from the window.

"…Where are we heading, anyway?" Mika-san finally breaks the silence.

“Well… I was thinking of Arashiyama.”

“Like the viewing platform there? The view is so pretty from there! You’re quite the romantic, Kohe-san.”

Kohe-san forces a smile, but he doesn’t deny it. When choosing a place to kill yourself, I guess a nice place is better than a dirty one. I remember Sakurako-san saying before that there’s a reason why people choose their suicide locations. Maybe he has memories of that place. It’s a popular spot for lovers or families to see the night view, and you used to be able to ski there.

“Aren’t there too many people…? We’re using charcoal, right?”

“Yeah. Drugs are too difficult. You could take the wrong dose so it isn’t lethal, or someone could take you to the hospital to get your stomach pumped. Should we find a spot with less people around? Someone might notice that something's up.”

Mika-san looks pale. She has a really reluctant look. She must have had a bad experience.

“Well, first we have to buy the charcoal. There’s a hardware store nearby, right?”

“They sell it at the grocery stores at this time of year, too, don’t they?”

Summer is the best season for yakiniku in Hokkaido. All the super markets sell charcoal and portable stoves in prominent places, like next to the cash register.

“All we need is a portable stove, charcoal, some tinder, and some duct tape, right? If nobody here smokes, we’ll need a lighter, too.”

“If we buy it together won’t people notice? People are kind of strict about this kind of stuff nowadays,” Kasumi-chan says to Mika-san, who is counting on her fingers.

“Should we buy meat with it?”

“Like the good stuff for yakiniku?”

It’s true that buying meat would make it look like we’re just having a barbecue, but I’m not sure it’s enough to distract from the duct tape. However, in reality, nobody will be eating the meat. It’ll have to be thrown away.

“Why don’t we each buy something individually, rather than all together?”

Since there’s so many of us, we can just split up and get what we need. It wouldn’t seem unnatural.

“That’s it!”

It’s not that great of an idea, but Kohe-san gives me a high five. With that, we head to a large shopping center. My hands sting for a while from how hard the high five was. Kohe-san’s hands are hot, a bit sweaty from nervousness, and feel strong. Is this person really going to die in a few hours?

Part 6

If all of us walk around together with our vastly different ages and outfits, we’ll stand out. In the end, Kohe-san, Shun-san, and Mika-san each go on their own, while us 3 high school students are a group. I’m worried about Mika-san being on her own, but I don’t think anything will happen to her with so many people around. Even if there’s a murderer amongst us.

Besides, “murderer” is a really vague term. They could be an actual killer like Hanabusa, or just someone who went a little too far during legitimate self defense, for example. At least, I don’t think any of the members of this group would kill someone. The only one I’m not so sure about is Shun-san. Like Nazuna-san, he doesn’t speak at all. His leg doesn’t work, though. Of course he could just be pretending, but if he’s not I think killing someone would be a pretty high hurdle for him. Not only do I have to find out who “she” is, but who the “murderer” is as well. Hanabusa has given me a difficult task.

The 3 of us high school students set off to buy the duct tape. We go to the stationary corner of the grocery store. Since the car is so big, we buy 3 rolls of cloth-type tape. We get 3 different colours to avoid suspicion. Black, white, and transparent. Kasumi-chan also grabs a thick, oil based pen for camouflage. Now that I think about it, buying a lot of tape isn’t going to make anyone think we’re committing suicide via charcoal. However, there’s a guilty feeling that makes us try to hide it anyway.

“Nazuna-san, are you going to buy anything?” I ask.

She shakes her head, however, on the way to the register, I see a ballpoint pen with a kitten decoration, and pick it up. I quickly slide it in with the rest of our stuff before the cashier finishes off our order. I hand the pen to her after we check out. “Thanks,” she says with a reserved smile.

Since we’re done shopping, we walk around the store a bit. The sweet, buttery scent of croissants makes my stomach rumble. My stomach grows even louder in response to the bell signalling more are coming fresh out of the oven.

“It smells so good. I’m hungry,” Kasumi-chan says with a bitter smile.

“I wonder if it would be so bad to just have one piece.”

Kasumi-chan stops walking after my suggestion.

“I dunno, I just want the last thing I eat to be delicious… Tatewaki-kun, what did you have for dinner last night?”

“Huh? I had jingisukan.”

Kasumi-chan immediately starts laughing.

“It seems really ‘you’ for your last meal to be meat. It seems boyish.”

“What about you two?”

I look at the two of them. Nazuna-san shakes her head. I guess it wasn’t the dinner she hoped for.

“I just had an ordinary meal. My parents didn’t know it’d be my last one. Simmered flounder, boiled Japanese mustard spinach, onion and potato miso soup… and boiled tofu.”

It’s a healthy yet ordinary dinner.

“Was it tasty?”

“No. I only like onions in my miso soup, and I hate shiitake mushrooms which were in the boiled tofu…”

Kasumi-chan holds her hands behind her back and gives a mischievous grin. “Then… How about we buy some in secret?”

Nazuna-san frowns like she doesn’t agree, but I buy three mini croissants anyway. The sweet glaze and butter are oozing out, but it’s still flakey. Kasumi-chan has the biggest grin

while she eats it. I eat it in two bites, but it really is delicious. It's an exquisite combination of flakey, soft, and chewy. Even just the crumbs I spilled are good.

Still, the idea of a piece of bread being someone's last meal is kind of sad. Since I don't plan on dying tonight, I'm sure I'll remember this every time I see a mini croissant. It might be too painful for me to ever eat one again.

"You should try it, Nazuna-san. It's really good." Kasumi-chan urges Nazuna-san.

She looks embarrassed, but eventually gives in to Kasumi-chan's smile. She takes the croissant and finishes it in two bites.

"…It was good."

She looks surprised by how much she enjoyed it. The three of us smile at each other. Seeing their smiles makes me want to cry.

"Oh, did you finish your shopping?" Mika-san is still a bit far away, so she waved at us with her whole arm.

I probably would have started crying if she hadn't come back.

"Look, I got some scented candles. I thought it would be nice to mask the charcoal scent… Oh, and I got some stationery, too." She shows me the rose scented candles, and floral patterned paper. "What did you buy?" She asks Kasumi-chan.

Before she can answer, Kohe-san and Shun-san come back. We all head back to the car to go over what we bought. Kohe-san bought charcoal, kindling, and a brazier. He also bought beer, dried squid, and marshmallows as camouflage. Shun-san bought a lighter, along with bug repellant. He got fireworks, too. The fireworks would have been enough already, so why the bug repellant? Shun-san frowns when we ask about it.

"I don't want to be bitten by a mosquito in my final moments."

Everyone bursts out laughing.

"You don't want to let a mosquito live off your blood after you're gone?" Mika-san asks.

Shun-san shakes his head.

"I can't stand them. Dying while scratching a bug bite would be the worst."

Mika-san and Kasumi-chan laugh at how much he hates bugs. It feels like we're going camping together. However, when they notice he also bought a long, thin rope and a box cutter, their laughter stops.

"…I thought it'd be best to have a backup plan," he says with a serious expression.

Everyone else's facial expressions disappear. Mika-san slowly takes out her writing utensils.

"Oh yeah… Did you all prepare a suicide note?"

Everyone except Shun-san shakes their heads.

"I never wrote one," Kohe-san says with a shrug.

"Hmm. It doesn't have to be for your family, but just so the police don't have to wonder if it was a suicide or murder or something, you know? Or have to get an autopsy. But if everyone in the group writes a suicide note, they'll know for sure that it was a suicide. So we have to write a suicide note so we don't trouble others," Mika-san says, and hands each of us a sparkly, pastel coloured pen and some girly stationery.

"I'm sorry, I'd hate it if someone was mad at me even after I've died,"

Those are the kinds of feelings she wants us to convey. She hands me a pen as well. It's a glittery, light blue pen. As you'd expect, the white paper has a floral and lace pattern

embossed on it. Nazuna-san takes out her pen from earlier. It's cute on the outside, but the ink is just plain black.

I have no idea what to write. I guess that makes sense since I'm not actually planning on dying, but if I really were to write a suicide note, I wonder who I'd write to. I'd like to leave words for everyone who has helped me along the way, but I wouldn't be able to pick an order because it'd be like ranking them by how much I liked them. I'd like to write to my mom, older brother, grandpas and grandma, Isozaki-sensei, and Sakurako-san.

To Sakurako-san. What words would I choose to leave with her? A complaint? Because of her, my life took a totally different direction. Until then I was always bored, my life was stagnant, and I couldn't even think about the future. I felt like the whole city had lost its colour. I thought it was just as stagnant as I was, dying out.

But it's different now. Totally different. Vivid lifes and deaths are crawling all around me, struggling. I always thought bones were dead, but now I think of them as living things. They're as much a part of life as anything else. My bones support and move me, even allowing me to hold this pen.

I look down affectionately. I am alive. Until I met her, I didn't realize this simple fact. The world suddenly became bright again.

I changed when I met you. You've taught me so many important, precious things. I wish I could keep the time we spent together as a specimen, even if it won't last forever. You've taught me about loss, too. I've always known that we wouldn't be able to stay together forever. I lo-

"Are you done writing, Tatewaki-kun?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

Kasumi-chan is giving me a worried look, so I quickly strike a line through my last sentence. I fold the note into quarters and stuff it in my pocket. It's a strange feeling. I'm not really going to die. There's no reason for me to write a real suicide note. Eventually, Kohe-san, who was fretting over what to write, finishes writing. Mika-san meekly nods after seeing that everyone is done.

"That means all the preparations are done."

"…Should we go, then?" Kohe-san says. His voice sounds a bit shaky.

He has his head down, so I can't know for sure, but it sounds like he's starting to cry. Up until this point, everyone seemed to be having fun. We're just a group of strangers, but everyone was talking and laughing together, but writing suicide notes has completely changed the mood. Now there's no avoiding the fact that we're going to die. Everyone is staring blankly, without a hint of emotion. Nobody is talking. The car slowly pulls out of the supermarket parking lot.

The sun is already starting to set, so the sky is a mix of blue and orange. Fear gradually wells up in my heart. I still don't know who "she" is, or who the "murderer" is. I asked Phantom for a hint again, but obviously they wouldn't tell me anything.

“Entre chien et loup, or Oumagatoki in Japan. It’s between night and day, reason and instinct, good and evil. You are standing between life and death. There’s no room for errors. Be careful.”

It’s just another vague message. Entre chien et loup. It’s an old French expression that Isozaki-sensei, who speaks French, taught me before. It means twilight, since at this time of day, it’s hard to tell the difference between a dog and a wolf. So basically, right now.

Oumagatoki is supposed to be the time of day when humans and spirits run into each other. If you’re not careful, disasters can occur during Oumagatoki. It certainly feels that way right now, at least. I’m sure there’s both humans and monsters here, right now.

Part 7

Shun-san has been the most suspicious person here from the beginning, but he has a major weak point. Kohe-san seems like a good person, but he’s the one who got the car, picked the suicide spot, and did all the preparations, so he could be up to something. I have doubts about Mika-san, too. It’s mostly the fact that she won’t tell her exact age, and her natural leadership that makes me distrust her. She knows too much about poison, too. I don’t want to even think about it, but I can’t be too sure about Kasumi-chan or Nazuna-san.

I wish I could at least know who the murderer here is, and what they did. Without any hints, I can’t solve this mystery. Just as I start thinking I should message Hanabusa again, someone’s phone goes off. It’s the intro to Diavel’s song, Dokuro.

“Tatewaki-kun?”

“Oh… I just got an email…”

Why did I set that song as my ringtone? It’s embarrassing having other people hear it. This is Sakurako-san’s fault.

“Y’know, Tatewaki-kun… You’re sure on your phone a lot,” Mika-san says suspiciously.

“There’s no real meaning behind it… I just thought it might look weird if I don’t mark my messages off as read….”

She sighs at my excuse. I guess it didn’t convince her.

“You understand that if you report this, everyone here will be in a lot of trouble, right? Committing suicide is a crime. In Japan, people who attempt suicide are treated as criminals. We would all be arrested on suspicions of planning to commit suicide.”

“Th-that’s not what I was doing at all! I’d never report you guys!”

The word “criminals” keeps bouncing around in my head. Everyone is staring at me with suspicion. Even Kasumi-chan is glaring at me. Nazuna-san, too. Until now, she’d been looking out the window, but now she’s staring straight at me. She looks sad.

It’s true that suicide is technically murder, since you’re killing yourself, but I feel like people who attempt to take their own life should be offered help, not be treated as criminals. Maybe if they get help, they won’t feel like they want to attempt again. The police are the enemy to those who have already made up their mind.

“…Then show me.”

“Hm?”

“If it’s nothing special, then you have nothing to hide, right?” Mika-san says, and holds out her hand.

I gulp. It would be bad if she saw my conversation with Phantom. They’d find out I’m a spy. If I get kicked out, I won’t be able to protect “her” from the “murderer” in the car.

“Hurry up and show me.”

“But it’s really embarrassing, so…”

“Show me!”

I instinctively flinch and shrink back when Mika-san suddenly raises her voice. Looking into her eyes makes me break out in a cold sweat. Kicking me out of the car… is that really all they’d do to me? If they kicked me out, I might report them. That’d make me their enemy. Knowing that, would they really kick me out? In that case, what would happen to me? I glance at the rope and duct tape. Would it be enough to just restrain the traitor? What would happen to me once they achieved their goal? Inside the car or outside the car…

My heart is about to burst from fear. I’m not even the only spy. What if everything was just carefully planned by Phantom to make me commit suicide with them? Ahh, what do I do? I have my suicide note in my pocket. The car suddenly makes a loud noise. It begins to stop moving. Kohe-san parks it on the side of the road.

“K-Kohe-san?”

“Sorry, I’ll go investigate.”

By the time I realize it, it’s too late. Kohe-san pins my arms behind my back and plunges his hand into my pocket.

“Hey! Using force is going too far!”

He pushes me against the seat and tosses my phone to Mika-san.

“…”

Ah, this has turned into a desperate situation. Mika-san’s face becomes even more stern as she looks down at my phone’s screen. It’s no use, they found out…

“‘Yay, we’re having meat for dinner tonight again!’...”

Everyone falls silent as she reads out loud to no one in particular. I don’t understand for a moment.

“‘But today is chicken. Healthy!’…”

“I see… So you were going to have jingisukan for dinner tonight?” Kasumi-chan can’t hold back her laughter.

“…His mom says ‘come home soon, before I eat all of this myself.’ Your mom sure sounds like fun.”

Mika-san tosses my phone to Kohe-san, who then lets me go.

“Sorry…”

“It’s fine…”

Kohe-san apologizes and hands me my phone. I turn off my notifications and slide it back in my pocket. That could’ve been bad. I was saved by my mom. Well, it was actually my mom’s text that put me in danger in the first place. Wouldn’t that make it weird to thank her?

“You have a nice mom, but I guess you’re still suicidal, too,” Kasumi-chan mutters.

“Speaking of which, I don’t think Tatewaki-kun has told us why he wants to die. He’s always listening, but I still don’t know why he’s here today,” Mika-san looks at me like she still doesn’t completely trust me.

“Huh? W-well, it’s not just one reason, there’s a bunch of them…”

“Recently I’ve heard that there’s people going on suicide forums looking for someone to catch the bus with, but they actually plan on robbing them. I sure hope that isn’t you.”

“Of course not!”

“Then I’d like to hear a few of these reasons you have.”

“My… reasons…?”

She really caught me off guard with that. Of course I’m not a robber, but if I fight back too much, it’ll only make things worse. A reason… If I were to kill myself, what would be the reason? What’s a compelling reason? It has to be something that would convince Mika-san.

“Well… It’s hard to narrow it down to one… But if I had to say…”

My head is swirling with thoughts. I’ve had so much time today, so why didn’t I prepare an answer beforehand? I probably look like a goldfish gasping for air right now.

“Because there isn’t one.” A voice from the back of the car responds before I do.

“Ah…”

It was Nazuna-san. That’s all she says before looking away again. I thought she might be trying to help, but she doesn’t follow up on that. What should I do… Everyone in the car is silently looking at me.

“…That’s right. Even if there isn’t a reason, there’s plenty enough to make someone want to die,” Kohe-san says softly.

“Yeah… I get that.” Kasumi-chan nods as well.

“Boring, repetitive days filled with nothing. Having nothing to do makes you feel like dying. I’m like that, too. Being told what to wear, how to live, everything… little by little, it builds up until I’m not even ‘me’ anymore.” Kasumi-chan is curled up in a ball, hugging her knees.

Mika-san leans against her small friend sitting next to her. Sakurako-san suddenly comes to mind. If I hadn’t met her, maybe I’d be having those thoughts as well.

“The chasm created by those thoughts slowly fills up, drop by drop. Day after day. Sometimes, it fills all the way up. Tatewaki-kun’s must be overflowing, too,” Kasumi-chan says as she quietly starts to cry.

Mika-san pats her shoulder a bit firmer. Encouraging her.

“It’s okay. It’s all over after tonight.”

Kasumi-chan nods.

“Everything is alright now. It’s all going to end. We all just have to keep it up for a little longer,” Mika-san says, looking around the car.

The thread connecting us grows tenser. Why is this happening? Because of me the mood inside the car grows even more bizarre.

“I’m definitely going to die.”

What used to be fear turns into solid determination. What should I do? I have to save you all. I feel like I’m being slowly strangled by “her.” I look at my watch. It’s already about 7pm. That’s my curfew. It’s not super rigid, but I can’t break it without saying anything. After half an hour my mom will notice something’s wrong. I feel like I’m running out of time. The car starts to move again as impatience wells up within me. The only sound is Kasumi-chan’s sobbing echoing in the car.

Part 8

The car is heading for the Arashiyama viewing platform. The first one to notice what's happening is Kohe-san, the driver.

"What is that?"

"Is something wrong?"

"No… I've just noticed a lot of police cars."

Sure enough, another police car rolls by while he's talking. I can see red lights flashing up ahead, too.

"…"

Everyone looks at me again.

"It wasn't me, I really didn't report this. If I did, I'd be arrested, too."

I don't want them to be suspicious of me again. I really, truly didn't report them. My phone suddenly buzzes again. It's another email. I take my phone out of my pocket.

"It's my mom asking why I'm out past curfew. I'd better make something up so she doesn't send out a police search for me."

I say to nobody in particular. The person who actually messaged me is Phantom.

"Go to the dilapidated house."

I immediately know what they're talking about. Now that I think about it, it's not too far from here.

"Umm… Since there's a lot of cops, why don't we go to a different spot? I know a place nearby where nobody ever goes."

"Is it suitable for this?" Mika-san asks suspiciously.

"Yes, it is. It's actually the spot where someone I know committed suicide before. It's a vacant house, so nobody will be there."

My suggestion is quickly accepted. It seems like everyone is looking forward to dying soon. As we start heading to the old house, Kasumi-chan starts to seem off.

"Umm… She doesn't seem to be feeling well."

Maybe she cried too much, or she's scared of death, or stressed out. Or maybe all of the above. Kasumi-chan looks really pale.

"Are you okay? Should we stop at the convenience store first?"

She nods. Kohe-san parks the car as soon as he can. I get out of my seat, and help Kasumi-chan out, since I'm sitting near her. Mika-san gets out, too, and takes Kasumi-chan to the bathroom. I'm kind of uneasy about leaving the other three alone in the car. Nazuna-san is the only girl, after all. I don't think you could get away with much in a convenience store parking lot at this time of day.

Kasumi-chan must have been feeling really sick, since she and Mika-san spend quite a while in the bathroom. Once Mika-san comes back, she says, "I don't think she can do it," to me.

"I see…"

There's only one reason I can think of for why she wasn't feeling well. Her body is refusing to die. It's not that she lost heart, it's just instinct kicking in.

"…I guess we're leaving her behind, then."

Mika-san seems surprised at the unsympathetic words that came out of my mouth.

“But… once she’s been scared out of it once, I don’t think it’s possible for her anymore. It wouldn’t be fair to make her come with us.”

“…”

Mika-san is kind. Even though my words convince her, she’s not sure if she can leave Kasumi-chan alone at a time and place like this. I’m definitely worried, too. She’s still in her uniform since she met up with us right after school. If we take her along, Kasumi-chan will have no choice but to die. I wanted her to drop out, but this isn’t the best place to leave her. After all, she might decide she wants to die again tomorrow…

As if she’s decided, Mika-san heads back over to Kasumi-chan to persuade her. I’m praying she doesn’t come out of that washroom. Desperately. *To my grandma in heaven, please make her stay here a little longer.* I’m not sure if my wish will reach her, though. Mika-san returns to me alone.

“She doesn’t want to come. I left the taxi fare with her.”

“I see.”

I accidentally let my relief show on my face. I try to hide it so Mika-san doesn’t notice, but she seems to feel the same way I do.

“Besides… I don’t want to let such a little girl die,” Mika-san says.

I want to say “I don’t want you to die, either,” but I can’t. When the two of us head back to the car together, Kohe-san seems to understand immediately, and nods silently.

“…Is that so? It can’t be helped. I’m worried about leaving her alone, but… Looking at her reminds me of my daughters.”

Fortunately, Kasumi-chan doesn’t know where the empty house is. In the unlikely event that she reports us, the police won’t be able to find us right away.

“But we have to hurry,” Mika-san says. “We absolutely have to succeed,” she says with all her strength.

She sounds so strong, yet so fragile as if she could break at any moment. The air in the car grows even heavier, like we’re wrapped up in horrifying darkness. With Kasumi-chan’s retreat, everyone else has become even more determined to succeed. At the same time, the feeling that if you don’t escape now, you’ll definitely die together tightly clings to each of our bodies. I feel like I’m drowning in darkness. I wonder what everyone’s mentality is like right now.

Maybe they’re thinking they don’t want to die, but it would be a betrayal to back out now. Maybe they think it would be wrong to choose not to die tonight. Pride, guilt, or solidarity could be keeping them from deciding. I feel a strange affection for the odd group I met today. I like them. I don’t want them to die, but I know that’s presumptuous of me. Denying them their decision feels like it’s denying them freedom to choose what they do with their lives.

What should I do, then? What if I die along with them? I almost convinced myself of that. This place is scary. I’m starting to feel sick, too. I want to get to the empty house as soon as possible. Whatever happens, I want out of this car.

“Take the next left, the after that… Just keep going straight.” I help Kohe-san navigate to take my mind off the nausea. “Kohe-san? You missed your turn.”

I look over at him as we pass the turnoff. It’s dark in the car, but I can still tell that he’s pale.

“Kohe-san…”

“…”

He suddenly parks the car and gets out. He takes a few steps, then vomits on the ground. No, I don't think anything actually came up. His whole body trembles.

"Are you okay? Wanna switch drivers?" Mika-san asks once Kohe-san comes back.

"No, I'm fine."

His voice is calm, but we all understand. Since he's driving, all of our lives are in his hands. He's taking us to our death. He might as well be pushing us off a cliff with his own two hands. Despite the tremendous pressure, fear, and guilt… He sits back in the driver's seat.

"I have nothing left, so I have to die, no matter what." I don't know if he's telling us, or if he's trying to convince himself. "Are all of you really still okay?"

Nobody responds for a moment.

"Yeah, I'm still going through with this," Mika-san replies.

Shun-kun and Nazuna-san nod as well.

"What about you, Tatewaki-kun?" Kohe-san turns to look at me.

I want to shout out a refusal, but this mood won't allow me to. No words come out. I have no choice but to nod. Either way, I can't escape right now. That's right, if I run now, it's all over. Both for them, and for Phantom's promise.

"Let's go," I reply once I've resolved myself.

The car begins to move once more. Toward our fate. Suddenly, my phone vibrates. It's from Phantom.

"There's no escape from the car, go inside. You can use the toxic paint as an excuse." After those instructions, another message arrives. "Stay alert and clever, like a wolf. Her life depends on you."

That's right. My mission is to save "her." I can't die. I have to save both "her," and Sakurako-san. I straighten out my posture, and calm down my heartbeat. Even if I have to betray the others, I will protect Sakurako-san.

Part 9

The gate to the property is already unlocked. Does that mean Phantom prepared it in advance? When we came here before, Sakurako-san picked the lock. The camper rattles and shakes as it makes its way down the pitch black, forest road. The only light is from the car. It's a new moon tonight, as well.

"Hey, isn't this that place where there was a murder case before? Three corpses were found…" It doesn't take long for Mika-san to notice and ask me.

"Yeah… some acquaintances of mine made a suicide attempt here. Only one of them died, though."

"I saw it on the news. The girls buried their friend's body, they found two corpses when they dug it up. They still haven't identified the other body, right? Do you think there's other people buried there?" She says, shivering.

"Isn't it a good thing? This place is perfect for committing suicide," Kohe-san says encouragingly.

Soon, the car pulls up to the parking spot behind the abandoned house. Once the lights from the car are turned off, we're engulphed in a darkness so deep that I can't even see my own hands.

"W-we can use the car, but why not take a look inside the house? There might be an airtight room that would work better… The previous owner left behind some stuff, too. Apparently it was owned by a painter, so there might be some highly toxic paint left, like with arsenic…"

"Really… Shall we go, then?"

Mika-san lights an aromatic candle in a small bottle made of frosted glass. She looks at Kohe-san.

"Sure, why not?" Kohe-san says, and mutters something about being like a test of courage.

"I'll sit out because of my leg." Shun-san shakes his head while he lights a similar insect repellent candle.

Making his way through this place would definitely be a pretty tall hurdle for him with his leg. Darn it.

"Alright. We'll call for you if we find anything." Mika-san doesn't insist, either.

I can't think of a reason to make him come along. It doesn't look like Nazuna-san is leaving her seat, either. I don't want to leave Nazuna-san in a place like this, though.

"Nazuna-san, why don't you come along, too?"

I give her a forced invitation and hold my hand out to her. It's too dark to see very well, but I think she looks surprised. She ends up taking my hand, though. She still doesn't take her hand back, even after getting out of the car. Her hands are slender but big, like Sakurako-san's. I suddenly start feeling embarrassed about holding her hand so casually, now. No matter what the reason is, I always get nervous when I hold a girl's hand.

The front door is already open. There's dust piled up all over the living room. Nazuna-san grasps my hand tightly as we walk inside.

"This feels like a test of courage," Mika-san scoffs.

There's dead leaves and tree branches scattered on the floor. They must have gotten in through the broken windows. There seems to have been other intruders before us, since the room has a faint animal-like scent.

"Be careful with the fire," Kohe-san says to Mika-san, as she uses her candle to illuminate the room.

The dust sparkles in the light.

"…Hehe, it's kinda weird to tell me to be careful when I'm here to off myself."

She places her candle on a worn out shelf. Kohe-san puts his box of briquettes and a plastic bag with a small item in it next to her candle.

"What do you think? Should we get the brazier?"

"Shouldn't we investigate a little more? The uhh… Reception here is bad," Mika-san says worriedly, using her phone for light.

I wonder… If she's trying to contact Kasumi-chan. I take out my phone, too. Sure enough, it flickers between one bar and being out of range. Now that I think about it, I haven't contacted Hitoe-san at all.

"I think the car is better, after all," Mika-san says after walking a lap around the first floor.

I found some paint, but it doesn't seem to be toxic.

"Yeah, this place doesn't seem usable."

"Let's head back to the car, then."

They've completely lost interest in the house. If we go back now, my fate is sealed. It's not going to be easy to escape from the car.

"Umm… What about the second floor?"

"I don't think there'll be anything up there, though."

"Oh… Yeah, but maybe we can take a look…"

I have to try to stall for a little bit and prevent them from leaving. If all goes well, they'll get scared and back out like Kasumi-chan. Besides, Phantom prepared this place and led me here. Maybe there's some kind of hint. No, it might have just been a decision.

"…Are you scared?" Mika-san asks, staring straight at me.

"Huh?"

I want to investigate the second floor, even if just a bit.

"You seem like you've been stalling for a while now, Tatewaki-kun."

"Oh…"

Kohe-san is glaring at me, seeming to have noticed as well.

"What's your answer? Are you going to die, or are you too scared?"

"Kohe-san?"

"It's alright either way, of course. But… If you can't go through with it yourself, I can help… if you want."

"Ah…"

It takes me a moment to understand what he means.

"…"

However, looking into his dark eyes lit by the swaying flame of the candle, I finally understand. They're offering their "cooperation" so I don't have to do this myself.

"What will you do? Do you want me to do that?"

"N-no way! I can't make all of you carry the burden of that crime!"

I gulp. The two of them look so serious. I look over to Nazuna-san, but she has her head down. She doesn't seem to realize I'm asking for help, but I guess that's obvious, since she thinks I want to die. I don't want to die.

"Be clever like a wolf." Phantom's words pass through my mind.

I wonder if there's a hint in there. This is the second time today I've heard about wolves. No, that's wrong. It's the third time.

"Choni shagai…"

I feel around for the small object in my pocket under my suicide note. It's a smooth piece of bone. A charm from a wolf. The good luck I stole.

"Well…"

Kohe-san and Mika-san are staring at me with determination in their eyes. I don't know who the girl I have to protect is, or if I'm in the same room as a murderer. The only thing I know for sure is that I can't die by their hands.

"Ah!"

"Tatewaki-kun?!"

I scream as the room fills with darkness. It was intentional, though. I knocked the scented candle down and broke it. While the others are confused, I grab the lighter. I was worried the candle would start a fire, but lucky for me it went out on the way down. With this, the only light is from Mika-san's phone. I'm not a kid anymore, so I'm not scared of the dark. I quickly grab hold of Nazuna-san's hand. Despite the darkness, I take her upstairs.

I've already been here before. Last time, I was following Hector, but now I'm the one leading the way. I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing. Is this just me trying to find a sense of purpose? My hypocrisy? My ego? It's always like this. I'm not Sakurako-san. I'm not built as strong as her, but I still have things I can't give up on.

I head into the bedroom where Hitoe-san tried to commit suicide. Nazuna-san and I both try to catch our breath. She looks really flustered and confused. I lock the door and lean my back against it.

"Haah… Haah… Hm?"

I try taking out my phone. I only have one bar of connection. I try sending a message to Phantom, but it won't send. The signal must be too weak… No, that's not it.

"The account is… No way…"

It's not that the email can't be sent, but I get an error message when it tries to. Phantom has deleted their account.

"What? Wh-what am I supposed to do?!"

I can't even get in touch with them at such an important moment. I feel abandoned. No, that's not right. I've definitely been abandoned. Before I knew it, I started to trust their kind words. They supported me while I was hospitalized. The person who tried to find out what happened to Wolf. But still… They're trying to take justice into their own hands.

Phantom is probably Hanabusa. At first, I thought they were Sakurako-san, but that was just wishful thinking. I wish the ghost who was guiding me was my dad, someone who I always looked up to, instead of a serial killer. I didn't completely hate Phantom, but now they've betrayed me. Maybe there was no "girl" or "murderer" in the first place. I'm sure they just wanted me to write a suicide note, go to this house, and die. They even warned me several times to "be clever." They must be laughing at how I obeyed their every command like an idiot.

"Darn it!"

I burst into anger, and slam my fist against the door.

"Tatewaki-kun!"

Mika-san calls to me from the other side of the door. The other two must have made their way up the stairs in the dark. As long as I lock myself in here, they can't light the charcoal to kill themselves.

"Open the door! Open up!" Kohe-san yells, violently slamming on the door.

I wonder what he'd do if I opened it right now? He sounds completely enraged. What are they going to do when they realize I'm not letting them in? They could just go buy a new lighter, after all. No, they could even use the flame from Shun-san's bug repelling candles in the car. Ugh, hiding the lighter was completely pointless now. Once again, I'm painfully aware of how poorly thought out this plan was. Why do I have to be such an average person?

"I…"

'Listen to what your own beliefs are telling you'

I suddenly remember what Phantom told me. I want to be strong and clever. There's not much I can do, but I can't just sit back and let this happen.

"I don't want anyone to die! That includes both of you!"

After slamming on the door one last time, he finally stops.

"…Nobody is happy to learn that someone they know has died, even if they've only known each other for a short time. That's why I don't want you to die."

I wish I was better at speeches. I have to calm down, I can't show my emotions. I keep repeating those words in my head, but it's no use. I can hardly keep my voice from trembling as I start to cry.

"We're all here because we didn't want to die alone! We should all be helping each other find the will to live, like a lifeline… I have a feeling that everyone who's here tonight was hesitating, and doesn't truly want to die, deep down!"

Nobody objects. I can hear Mika-san sighing on the other side of the door.

"…I love you guys. I don't want to lose any of you, so please reconsider. I'll do anything I can to help, so… Please…"

I'm fully aware that there's nothing I can really do, of course. Still, I have to reach out to someone who is going to die. It's decided by the law, but even besides that, my beliefs won't allow me to sit idly by.

"…Mika-san, you said you wanted to die while you were still beautiful, but let me tell you one thing. Nobody is beautiful after they die. Sure, there won't be any external trauma if you die by suffocation like this. But the moment you die, your corpse starts to rot. It's summer right now, so with the fire, it'll be over 30 degrees in the car. In under a minute, flies will find our corpses and lay their eggs in them. The eggs will hatch 10 hours later."

Sakurako-san loves the bustle of living things. Our dead flesh becomes a nursery for a paradise of insect lives.

"When will our bodies be discovered? It'll be tomorrow at the earliest. Probably even longer since we're at a place like this. Imagine it. What state will we be in when we're discovered inside that car?"

A small laugh escapes out of my mouth. How ironic.

"It's funny. There was no point in avoiding eating and drinking. We'll be discovered in terrible condition, covered in maggots. Even your lovely clothes will be meaningless. Is that okay with you, Mika-san?"

She doesn't reply. However, I can tell she's trembling on the other side of the door.

"…Do you want your family to have to identify your body in that state? Kohe-san, are you okay with that being the last memory of you your family has?"

Neither of them replies. I look at Nazuna-san.

"You too, Nazuna-san… Are you okay with that?"

Nazuna-san, who has just been standing there seeming worried, finally lifts her head.

"You're unhappy. I don't doubt that every day is a struggle for you. Your relatives are wrong, and your mom should pay more attention to you. You're not the problem at all."

"Tatewaki-kun…"

My voice is becoming hoarse. She reaches out for my hand this time. I take it. A weak sigh leaks out from her mouth.

“I… Don’t really know what to say to you. I can’t do anything. I want to do anything I can for you… Even if it’s just a tiny bit. Maybe I could if I were an adult. So I escaped with you.”

There’s someone I can help right in front of me. I wish I had been born a little earlier. I wish I was more grown up. More, more… Every time I’m with Sakurako-san I’m made aware that I’m still a child. It’s frustrating. I wish I were older than her, or at least the same age. Maybe it’s like that in another world. One where Hanabusa isn’t targeting her. Where her whole life so far is different. Maybe a world like that exists. That’s why I want to save the life of Nazuna-san, who was born at the same time as me. If I can’t help her, how would I be able to protect Sakurako-san?

“Cruel relatives always protect themselves with convenient words. Dead people can’t speak. They will definitely humiliate you after your death. Isn’t that frustrating? Is that really what you want?”

Nazuna-san crouches down in the darkness. I can hear her crying. Her slender back trembles as she sobs.

“I won’t forgive society for letting bad people win. It’s wrong for society to allow people to be hurt. So you can’t die. You can’t end your life unhappily. It’s too sad.”

I squeeze Nazuna-san’s hand that I’m holding.

“…You absolutely deserve to be loved, understood, and acknowledged properly. You shouldn’t have to die because some people don’t realize that.”

I faintly feel Nazuna-san’s weight against me.

“So… Let’s go home together. Let’s think about the future together. I’m on your side, I’ll be your friend.”

If I had a little more courage, I would have hugged her while she cried. But I’m too scared, it feels like if I touch her she’ll break. I just hold her hand, and sit down next to her. Her crying quiets down. It’s quiet on the other side of the door. I feel like there’s still someone there, but there might not be. I’m worried about Kohe-san and the others, but I can’t just leave Nazuna-san while she’s crying. Eventually her breathing calms down, and I let go of her hand.

“…Let’s go back. From now on, we’ll think about the future together.”

I’m relieved when she nods in response. I’m sure there’s a heap of issues to sort out, but I’m fortunate enough to have adults I can depend on. I want to do anything I can to help her, but I’m not sure what I can do. When I try to open the door, I notice that it’s very heavy.

“Kohe-san?”

He’s leaning against the door on the other side.

“…Did it work?”

I’m relieved that he replied. He holds out his smartphone instead.

“…Yeah.”

I find myself smiling. On the screen is a photo of two sisters around the age of 10 grinning. They’re holding up a sketch book that has “happy birthday” written in it.

“I turned on my phone to see where I was stepping when I got this message.”

The message says, “sorry it’s a day late! Don’t drink too much, papa!”

Kohe-san puts his phone back in his chest pocket and gently pats it. It’s right around where his heart is.

"…Did you know that even with the same type of shishamo smelt, the colour and flavour changes depending on the river it's caught in? So… Let's all go eat some together in fall. We could try one spot this year, and a different spot next year," he says with a laugh.

"Yeah… That sounds like a great idea."

His situation is probably a lot worse than I think it is. He doesn't have a home to go back to tonight, and he might not have a place to stay next year, either. Still, I can't let a dad like him die.

"What about Mika-san?"

"I think… She went back to the car."

I wish he'd stopped her. I have to hold my tongue. It's not a good idea to scold someone in such a precarious position. I'm worried about her, so I leave keeping an eye on Nazuna-san to Kohe-san. I know it's dangerous, since I can't see anything, but I run down the stairs and bolt out the door. Even though it hasn't been a good day, the starry sky is beautiful. It's a new moon tonight, so the stars look overwhelmingly bright. I'd love to keep looking at the sky, but I don't have a moment to spare right now. I run back to the car. I can smell the dry scent of burning charcoal.

"It's locked?"

I pull the handle, but the door doesn't open. None of the doors open. I try to look through the front windows, but the partition door is closed, so I can't see anything. The curtains are closed from the inside on the other windows.

"Please open the door! Mika-san! Shun-san!"

I slam my fist against the car, but I don't get a response. Could they have already…? No, I can't let myself think like that. I'm still not sure if there's a "murderer" in the mix, either.

"Answer me already! I have to stay calm… What would Sakurako-san do? Right now, she would…"

If only I had just a fraction of her intelligence… As I'm thinking about what to do, I see a light traveling towards me.

"Headlights…?"

It keeps getting closer. There's no mistaking it, those are headlights… Along with them comes the familiar silhouette of a brown Renault kangoo.

"S… Sakurako-san!"

Am I dreaming? No, this definitely isn't a dream. But it's Sakurako-san. It's like she can see everything, as long as there's bones there.

Part 10

"Tatewaki-kun!"

To my surprise, Kasumi-chan is the first one to jump out of Sakurako-san's car.

"Huh? Ah, Sakurako-sa—"

As I'm struggling to grasp the situation, Sakurako-san gets out of the car, rushes over to me, and slaps me with what I think is all her strength. Even my mom has never hit me before.

"Sakurako-san…"

She pushes me against the camper. She's definitely angry. Furious, even. I've only ever seen her make this face once before. It's the same expression as when she attacked that man, Mitsuura.

"What the hell were you thinking, you absolute fool," Sakurako-san asks as she roughly pulls me away.

It knocks the wind out of me.

"…That's right, you said you were in Mashike. Did you want to die that badly?"

At the time, I couldn't fully comprehend her words. I thought she was being cruel. However, she doesn't want people to die. She was really worried that I came here to die. I can understand the meaning behind her clumsy words now.

"…If you can't talk to me, talk to Isozaki. Utsumi, Yuriko, and gran will listen, too. You have your grandfathers too, don't you?I She's not shouting, but her stifled voice is filled with deep anger.

"That's not it… I was…"

My cheek stings. I bit the inside of my cheek. I didn't think she would worry about me this much, but this isn't the time to get lost in emotions. I turn to look at the camper.

"I'll explain later. Right now we need to get that door open."

"What?"

"There's people inside trying to commit suicide using charcoal."

Kasumi-chan hugs her body tightly.

"Do you have a key? Is it locked?"

Sakurako-san investigates the door for a moment, then picks up a fist sized stone off the ground.

"Back up."

Oh well, I guess there's no choice. It's just the kind of bold idea I'd expect from Sakurako-san. She throws the stone at the window near the driver's seat without any hesitation. The glass is stronger than I expected. The rock made a crack, but it didn't shatter. I wrap my parka around my arm and use it to break the window. Sorry, Kohe-san.

"Mika-san!"

I put my hand through the window and unlock the door. We barge through the door that leads to the living space.

"Huh?"

However, the inside of the car is empty.

"What's going on? Where is everyone?" Kasumi-chan asks, bewildered.

"No… But Kohe-san and Nazuna-san are in the shack… So Mika-san and Shun-san should be here…"

For now I'm just relieved that we didn't find they passed out here. But those two are trying to die. As proof, the other interior door is lined with cloth tape.

"Where did those two go?"

This is the spot where Futaba-san tried to hang herself before. I feel a chill. Shun-san bought a rope and box cutter, too.

"What's that?"

"Hm?"

Sakurako-san is pointing toward the dilapidated house. No, it's past the house. There's a dark figure near a large tree being illuminated by an orange light. I rush through the darkness toward the light and find Mika-san and Shun-san gathered around the brazier. Shun-san is standing using his crutches, and Mika-san is sitting while looking up at him.

"Huh? Kasumi-chan… What's wrong?"

That should be our line.

"I was worried about you, so I hitch hiked here. What are you guys doing?I

"I see… We were just getting the fire going." Her phrasing seems a little weird since we're staring at the fireworks by her feet. "We thought it'd be nice to play with some fireworks before we go," she says awkwardly.

The fire in the brazier is already starting to die down.

"But… What are you doing, Tatewaki-kun? You look panicked… And where's Kohe-san and Nazuna-san?"

I shake my head, silently telling her that they won't be needing the charcoal tonight.

"…"

Mika-san doesn't say anything.

"…Are you really going to kill yourself tonight?"

She looks down at the ground.

"I will for sure. I'm not backing out." It's Shun-san, not Mika-san, who responds. "I'm just not meant to live any longer."

"That can't be true! You're just being hard on yourself…"

He said that he wants to kill himself because he survived a traffic accident… But is that really all there is to it? He wears sunglasses, even when it's dark. I feel like there's something else going on under the surface.

"It was an accident with a truck, right? There's nothing you could've done."

"Yeah, the truck suddenly turned out of nowhere. We didn't notice in time, and then…"

"Then there was really nothing you could have done to stop it, right? The way you're talking about it makes it sound like you killed-" As I'm speaking, Phantom's message about the "murderer" comes to mind. "…Or did you really end up killing someone?"

Shun-san's hands tremble.

"What the hell are you-"

"What happened to your leg?" Sakurako-san stands between Shun-san and I, and asks a different question.

"…I fractured my femur in the accident."

"A fractured femur… That normally only happens to the elderly. It's a strong bone, so it's difficult to break. You often hear about it happening in skiing, snowboarding, or other winter sports. Recently, more people have gotten hurt like that from bouldering. Do you understand? The femur is the strongest part of the human body. It won't break unless it's hit with an extremely powerful force," Sakurako-san says, pointing to her own femur.

When she puts it like that, it does sound unusual that he'd fracture it.

"The first thing that comes to mind when I hear about a fracture to the femoral shaft due to an accident is biking. The bike restricts the range of motion, and the accident is usually quite dramatic. When you get thrown into the air from the impact, falling and hitting the ground causes the bone to twist and break."

“A bike…?”

“Yeah. Though I don’t know if it was a bicycle like what boy has, or a motorbike.” Sakurako-san nods to me.

Shun-san silently listens to Sakurako-san’s reasoning. It might be due to the light from the brazier, but his face looks pale. His hands shake as he grips his crutches.

“…Was it intentional?”

“Of course not! It really was an accident! A truck made a careless right turn!”

“In that case, it wasn’t murder. An accident is an accident, but you still feel responsible for allowing your passenger to die, don’t you?”

Shun-san’s face crumples. The red flames of the brazier sway in the reflection in his eyes, making it look like they’ve been set aflame.

“No… you’re wrong. It was a murder. If I hadn’t made that guy ride on the back that day, if I made him wear his helmet properly, if I hadn’t been in the truck’s blind spot… it’s my fault. It’s the same as if I’d killed him.”

“Shun-kun…” Mika-san, who has been sitting next to him, wears a sad expression.

“Everyone said I couldn’t have prevented it. They just say they’re glad I’m safe… But it’s not good enough. All I hear is “but you killed him” in the back of my mind. Even my mom and dad say it’s not my fault.”

—His mom and dad. With those words, we all finally understand. Who was in that accident. It wasn’t his friend, it was his brother that was killed.

“That day, I took my parents’ lives as well… I might as well have killed all three of them. Their child killed their other child… My dad says he’s happy that at least one of us made it out, but… There’s no way they could forgive me that easily! My mom can’t even look me in the eyes… it’s like she hates me.”

The kind thing isn’t always the right thing to do. A kind world is also cruel. He can’t forgive himself. His kind mother who doesn’t want to hate her child can’t bring herself to look at him. If she looks, she’ll only breed more resentment. Not making eye contact, just using words. But even just words cut like a knife to him. He’s being torn apart inside.

“So I have to die…” he murmurs as he crouches down with both hands covering his face.

It’s like he doesn’t have the strength to stand anymore.

“…But… Won’t that just burden your parents with your death as well?”

“The least I can do is atone for my brother,” Shun-san answers Mika-san’s quiet questions with his face still covered.

“I see. That may be so. But do you really think that’s how they’ll feel? You don’t think they’ll feel guilty about your death? Your death won’t be an accident. You’ll have chosen death for yourself.”

“That’s…”

He lifts his head. Mika-san gently pushes the hair off of his forehead.

“Even if you feel guilty, aren’t you just increasing the amount of people who are mourning? Don’t you think your parents will blame themselves? If you think you killed your brother, won’t your parents have to suffer with the feeling that they killed you? Ah…” Mika-san suddenly raises her voice, as if she just realized something.

“But you know… My parents are the same. I got into a fight with my mom and we haven’t spoken in over a year… But it doesn’t matter, she’ll still feel responsible…”

Part 11

Mika-san stays close to the dejected Shun-san, and the two of them talk enthusiastically for a while. Her profile illuminated by the flame is beautiful. She almost looks angelic. I stop myself from saying anything in case she gets mad that I complimented her again.

Kohe-san is shocked about the broken window on his camper. He's relying on it for the time being until he can find a job and place to live. In the end, Sakurako-san agrees to pay for it, but I think I'll pay her back some day. I'm the one that jumped to conclusions. I didn't know any better, so I don't regret it.

By the time I realize it, it's already past 10pm. It's been a long, strange day. I don't think it's a day I'll ever forget. In fact, nobody knows what's ahead. They may still choose to die. At least today isn't that day. Still, with a strange sense of unity, we all exchange contact information. If any of us are in trouble, we'll try talking to the others first. Kohe-san laughs, saying he'll probably feel too embarrassed to contact us. However, we promised to go to Mukawa to try the smelt together.

I'm most worried about Nazuna-san. When she and Kohe-san came out of the abandoned house she came running up to me, but then her expression suddenly changed. I don't know why, but… Her silence felt angry. She's looking down, without making eye contact, just like always. Sakurako-san offers to drive her to the station, but she refuses. I wanted to talk with her a bit more. I use the kitten pen I got to write down my email address for her. I tell her to make sure she contacts me, and she nods in agreement. I want to make sure I help her. I'll do as much as I'm able.

"Why are you here, Sakurako-san?"

It's just the two of us and Kasumi-chan left. As the three of us get into the car, I ask Sakurako-san the question I've been wondering about the whole time.

"You're asking why? It's because you've been acting weird lately, so your mom got in touch with me. She was worried that you weren't home yet. I told her that you weren't at my house, but I said you were really torn up about Wolf's death. I asked Aoba-san, and he said you might be here, so I rushed over as fast as I could."

"Huh? Aoba-san did?"

"Yeah. He figured you might have gone to investigate Hanabusa alone. I tried to call you, but it said you were out of range. That's why I had to hurry all the way out here."

Apparently she met Kasumi-chan at the convenience store on the way. She was left alone, and she was worried about the rest of us, but she didn't want to go to the police. She decided to just hitchhike from the convenience store to get here. Even though she was in a hurry, Sakurako-san couldn't just ignore a girl hitchhiking while still wearing a school uniform. She pulled over and asked where she was going, and they realized they were headed to the same place.

"I thought that you were investigating Hanabusa, so I couldn't keep calm after hearing you were going to kill yourself. I'm glad the police didn't see me, since I broke the law 5 times getting here."

Sakurako-san is obviously still mad at me. She has the car stereo turned up loud to vent her anger. I have no choice but to explain what happened. Since Kasumi-chan is here, I don't mention Phantom. I just say that I saw this suicide forum, and noticed a post about tonight and couldn't just leave them alone. At least it's half true.

"That's so reckless! If the police found out, you'd be arrested for aiding in suicide!"

"I know that!"

"You're terrible! So everything you said was all a lie?!" Kasumi-chan is more upset than either Sakurako-san or myself.

"They weren't lies… The more I learned about everybody the more I couldn't leave you all alone."

Trying to omit Phantom from the story and my feelings of guilt, but it makes my explanation muddy and vague. I also think I'm a liar and a hypocrite. If I told the truth, it would just make things worse. Of course I'm overjoyed that they didn't die tonight, but I wasn't doing it for them, it was for Sakurako-san's sake. I basically used them.

"I'm not just playing around by wanting to die! I want to die because I have no other choice!"

"That's…"

"Mika-san and Kohe-san still have a future! But I… I'm just going back to my birdcage. Crammed inside a tiny cage… Spending every day just singing and talking, saying whatever my parents want to hear!"

Of course I want to do whatever I can. I'll do whatever is in my power. As I'm about to speak, Sakurako-san reaches her arm out in front of me to stop me. Now that I think about it, she lowered the volume on the stereo at some point.

"Do you want to know a little trick to life?"

"What do you mean?" Kasumi-chan asks, irritated.

Sakurako-san lets out a short sigh.

"If you're tired of your parents pushing their opinions on you, give in to your independence and rebelliousness. It's a normal reaction for someone your age. It's a sign you're growing up."

"But isn't there a limit to that? Adults are all the same."

"No. I'm not an ordinary adult. I show my parents respect, but I'm not obedient. No matter how much those feelings are forced into society as common sense, it's meaningless unless they come from the bottom of your heart. You'll realize that naturally as you get older. Don't force yourself to put up with things just because they're your parents."

"…Huh?" Kasumi-chan stares blankly.

"But with some exceptions, most parents will try to invade your emotions, but don't hurt yourself over it. Right now, you're powerless. Use your parents until you can make a safe place of your own. The world is filled with evil things, much more than you think."

Sakurako-san pulls a rough u-turn, and parks in the parking area just ahead. That might be her 6th traffic violation of the day.

"Listen. I'm an adult that lacks common sense and has poor social skills, but I understand what's happening in society. You're still a child, but you're physically old enough to reproduce. There are many people who will pretend to reach out to you just to use you for sex. Some people who don't even care if you live or die will try to get you pregnant. You're lucky if

you haven't met anyone like that until now," Sakurako-san says clearly to the young girl in the back of the car while leaning over the back of the driver's seat.

It makes me want to cover my ears. I know it's true, though.

"I don't think it's something that should ever happen. So you don't have to love your parents. It's fine if you don't, but keep rebellion in your heart. Use your parents well, even if you don't like it. Of course I'm not a parent, but I know that most parents' top priority is keeping their children safe. If your parents hurt you physically, you can rely on an adult that doesn't hurt you, whether it's the police or someone at school. It's an adult's job to keep you kids from dying. Relying on adults is not defeat."

Kasumi-chan has a meek expression while she listens to Sakurako-san. I don't know if she understood it all. I'm sure Sakurako-san truly means every word she says. I get the feeling that she was a child who couldn't trust adults, as well. However, she did have a few adults who were always on her side. Gran, her uncle, and Shouko-san are all kind adults that protect her.

"You'll become smarter. You should be able to find a path that doesn't involve death. Even I managed to do that. I've worked hard so I could have my own place where I feel comfortable," Sakurako-san says, then immediately faces forward again and turns up the volume on the car stereo.

It's much louder than before. Kasumi-chan shouts in surprise behind me. I cover my ears with my hands. It's far past what's considered an appropriate volume. She must be hiding her embarrassment.

If I was the same age as Sakurako-san, I wonder what our relationship would be like? I wonder if I'd still be close to her if we were both high school students. I wish I could've met her sooner. I've never wished I was an adult as much as I did tonight. I touch the Shagai in my pocket, and think about how Sakurako-san seems so much older than me.

Part 12

"I'm grateful that you brought him back, but I can't forgive you for letting him get hurt in Hakodate!"

After dropping Kasumi-chan off at the station, Sakurako-san takes me home. As soon as my mom sees me, she yells at me for being an idiot, then turns her anger to Sakurako-san.

"But mom, she-" I try to defend her, but Sakurako-san puts her hand in front of me.

"It's fine," she says.

She bows to my mom. My mom just turns away from her. Sakurako-san keeps bowing for a while, then silently returns to her car.

"…Why did you ask Sakurako-san for help?"

"Where else would you have gone?"

"Grandpa's place, or…"

My mom sighs.

"If you went to your grandpa's house, you wouldn't have kept it a secret. I couldn't get a hold of you, so I knew you were up to something. Did you really think I wouldn't realize you were with Kujo-san? Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Ah…"

My mom drags me into the living room. There's lots of boiled foods set out on the dining table, even though it's summer. They're all my favourites. There's so much food, but none of it has been touched. We have a late dinner together. I was worrying about how to explain everything to my mom, but she doesn't ask me anything about where I've been. She's just relieved to see how hungry I am.

"Well, I know I don't have to worry about you if you have such a big appetite."

"Is that your instinct as a parent?"

"Sort of. It's really easy to tell when you're worried about something. That's why I always make your favourite foods."

"When I'm worried…"

My mom starts to laugh. I think back to dinner last night. Yesterday was jingisukan, and today is boiled foods. Oh yeah, we had fried shrimp the day before yesterday. And the day before that was… Yeah, they're all my favourite foods. I wipe the tears that are beginning to well up with the back of my hand. I'm so sorry, mom.

After I finish eating, I start to get worried, so I send an email to everyone. I decide to come clean about my lies, since it's eating away at me. None of the adults get angry. They all say they understand. I don't know how they really feel, though. Kasumi-chan is still angry, but she tells me she went home and had a talk with her parents. She got into a huge fight with her mother, but for the first time, her strict father was on her side. Since they're worried about her wanting to die, Kasumi-chan is going to live with her grandma for a month.

But the one I'm most worried about is Nazuna-san. The email address she gave me is wrong. When I try to send an email I just get a notification saying it couldn't be sent.

I wish I could talk to my mom about the situation like Kasumi-chan did. But then I remember what my mom said. "Parents just know." I wonder if Nazuna-san's mom was aware of her suffering. What if she noticed but made her suffer anyway? The feeling of her hand still lingers on my palm. I can't help but worry. When I ask the others about her, they just tell me the same address she gave me. What should I do?

I worry about it so much that I end up at the Kujo house the next day. I walk through the lush, quiet garden.

"Hey there, runaway boy."

As I'm drawn through the garden by the smell of simmering bones, a tall, lean man greets me with a faint smile.

"…I'm not a runaway, Aoba-san."

"I'm really glad you're okay, though. I was worried when I couldn't contact you," He says, patting my head.

As usual, he has no sense of distance. Sakurako-san is simmering her bones in a large metal drum. Hector was laying next to her with his mesmerizingly fluffy stomach up, but he gets up once he notices me.

"What brings you here today, Aoba-san?" I ask while petting Hector, who forced his nose between my knees.

"He brought some of my uncle's files for me," Sakurako-san answers instead of Aoba-san.

She clicks her fire tongs.

“Your uncle’s?”

“Yeah. Since you don't want to be investigating with nothing to do off, I’m copying all of professor Shitara’s files in secret. If I get caught, I might get fired hehe,” Aoba-san says in a tone like he wouldn’t care if he were fired.

“…But how did you know I was in the abandoned house yesterday?”

“At first I thought you might be in Biei, but then I thought you wouldn’t go that far. But if I think about the distance from your house, it’s not much farther than Biei. But man, I’m really glad you were actually there.”

If he says so, I guess. However, I’m not really satisfied with the answer, and have a strange feeling. I know why, maybe it’s just a hunch. Seeing him looking at me while the sunlight filters through the trees overhead, I get the feeling like he was really thinking about me. However, on the other hand, I don’t know why he cares about me so much.

“Umm… Did you have yesterday off, Aoba-san?”

“Nope. Unfortunately, there were no autopsies, so I was stuck doing nothing. I was really worried when I heard you’d gone missing. I didn’t have any work to do, so I figured it was better to try to find you.”

“Oh… Thank you very much.” I bow politely. Aoba-san smiles and pats my head.

Hector tries to wedge himself between us. It’s like he’s saying, “pet me next!” Aoba-san happily pets Hector, then starts to leave. Hector seems to really like Aoba-san.

“What’s with that look?” Sakurako-san asks me suspiciously.

“It’s… Nothing, really.”

Since he does autopsies, he must smell like death. Hector really likes that smell, so it’s not unusual for him to be attached to Aoba-san. But somehow, I have a weird feeling. I’m still not fully convinced.

“Hey, Sakurako-san? Does Aoba-san make oil paintings in his free time?” I ask, while we head to the living room to have something to drink.

The door to the veranda is open to let some air in, but the breeze still feels warm. Thanks to the heat, we’re having iced tea today. The forecast said it was supposed to be over 30 degrees today.

“He has a lot of different hobbies, so he might paint… Why do you ask?” Sakurako-san says while fanning herself off with a folding fan.

I’m worried she’ll figure out why I’m asking. I sure hope this is all in my head. Even though Sakurako-san is smart, she’d probably never come to a conclusion like this herself.

“…I think Hanabusa is definitely someone close to us. They’re someone with extensive medical knowledge… And someone who knows about your past… I don’t think there’s very many people who meet all those criteria.” I give her an indirect reply.

If I’m too upfront about it, she’ll get defensive.

“Oh, that’s what you mean… I’ve thought about it, as well. Aren’t they just trying to make us think that, though? I don’t think they would make mistakes that reveal their identity so easily. The more times you commit the same crime, the less mistakes you make. The same goes for everything else. Practice makes perfect, and murder is just a skill.”

I guess she understood what I was getting at. Sakurako-san sighs in disgust.

“If you doubt Aoba-san, that just means you’re doing what Hanabusa wants. He’s not an evil person. So, why did you come here today? You said you had something to discuss.”

“Yeah, I guess so…”

I guess I won’t tell her about what I was thinking, then. I spent all morning preparing myself for this, too. Of course, Sakurako-san is still upset with me.

Hector jumps between us and licks Sakurako-san, desperately trying to stop us from arguing. Once he’s done with her, he comes after me. It’s like an indirect kiss that reeks of dog breath. I’m not happy at all. When gran realizes how tense the atmosphere is, she takes Hector and goes out shopping. It’s awkward to be left alone together. We’re both silent for a while. The sound of ice cracking against the window breaks the silence.

Sakurako-san sighs and says, “honestly… What a reckless thing to do.”

“But… I thought I could protect you.”

She raises one eyebrow when she hears me making up excuses. She probably doesn’t expect Phantom to keep their promises.

“Well, since everything turned out okay, I’ll forgive you. Don’t think I’ll be so lenient next time.” She leans back in her chair.

She’s sitting in her usual “thinking pose.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that I can’t figure out their true intentions.”

“True intentions?”

“Yeah. Hanabusa aids evil, and kills evil. But you’re not evil. You shouldn’t have been Hanabusa’s original target. They must have a reason why they haven’t decided to kill you. You may think you’re making your own decisions, but you’re still playing right into Hanabusa’s trap. Like brushing up against the edge of a knife without realizing it.”

In other words, she’s saying I could easily be killed if Hanabusa felt like it. A chill runs down my spine.

“Then… What do you think they’re after?”

“I don’t know yet.” Sakurako-san sighs again, resting her chin in her hands. “Who was the ‘girl you have to save,’ anyway? They never said.”

“Yeah. I managed to save everyone that day… But I’m still worried about Nazuna-san.”

Unlike Kasumi-chan, I feel like Nazuna-san needs help from someone outside her immediate family.

“I don’t know how to contact her, though.”

“That’s too bad.”

“What about the others?”

I tell Sakurako-san about how everyone was given the wrong address.

“In that case, check the website you were messaging on before. There might be some clues there.”

That makes sense. I take out my phone. Unfortunately, the site has already been deleted.

“What about similar sites?”

“I wouldn’t know any.”

However, I know some people who might. I ask Kasumi-chan about it. After explaining the situation, she also seems worried about Nazuna-san. We decide to meet in person and talk.

The meetup point is the big supermarket by the station. Kasumi-chan arrived a bit late. Her eyes look like she was recently crying, but I'm relieved that she's still smiling. However, Sakurako-san looks suspicious.

"Sorry. I contacted Mika-san, too. She said she's seen Nazuna-san's name on other suicide sites."

Shun-san and Mika-san have both seen her on multiple other websites. Unfortunately, those ones have been shut down, too.

"These places get shut down and reopened a lot, but it's okay," Kasumi-chan says, and takes out her laptop.

Her wallpaper is a popular anime character smiling. I'm surprised she can find websites like that after only typing a couple of words into the search engine. Apparently you can narrow it down a lot by using specific terms. Within a few minutes, she finds the website she was looking for. It's limited to the Hokkaido and Tohoku area.

"Good job, but this is the last time you should be doing this. Sometimes death can be transmitted like a virus. People are empathetic creatures. If you're around people who want to die too much, death can pull your legs out from under you," Sakurako-san warns Kasumi-chan with a bitter expression.

"Okaaay," she says, shrugging.

We move on to checking the site. Kasumi-chan and I switch seats. Before I know it, Kasumi-chan is holding some ice cream she bought. I'm relieved to see her and Sakurako-san peacefully eating snacks together.

"…Mika-san seems to be doing well, based on her emails. I think Hanabusa was talking about Nazuna-san. I might have lost our bet, but I still have to save her."

I've changed my mind. Sakurako-san looks confused.

"What do you mean?"

"About what?"

"Huh…? There were only two girls there that evening."

"Huh?"

I don't understand what Sakurako-san is trying to say at first.

"Clearly there's a misunderstanding. Did you think this 'Nazuna' boy you're talking about is a girl?"

"B… Boy?"

"Yeah. He had a slight Adam's apple, and a masculine head shape. His brow ridge was clearly that of a boy, too. There's lots of nerves there, so not even cosmetic surgery can change that. Looking for these things can tell you if the person you're looking at is biologically male or female. It doesn't tell you the gender in their mind, though. Biologically speaking, 'Nazuna' is a boy."

Sakurako-san takes my hand and touches it to both of our brow ridges to compare. Sure enough, mine is clearly more pronounced. I don't exactly remember what Nazuna-san's face looked like, though. Kasumi-san seems surprised, too.

"Now that I think about it… Nazuna-san didn't speak much at all. Maybe… It was so that we wouldn't find out."

"Yeah…"

Now I really have no idea who “she” is supposed to be. I’m stunned. I clearly remember how fragile Nazuna-san looked. How I hated seeing her- no, him- cry. Now that I think about it, I think I might have been feeling love. I’m completely shocked.

“Boy, get over yourself. This isn’t the time or place,” Sakurako-san says with a grim expression.

“Huh?”

She hands me her half eaten ice cream. She’s trying to say “eat something cold to cool your head.” I take a bite of the chocolate ice cream with brownie chunks. It’s so sweet that it gives me a headache.

“Look at this. I found this message.”

“It’s my fault my friend died. No matter how hard I try to forget her, she still haunts my dreams. I can’t keep living like this anymore.”

It’s a sad message, filled with pain. What catches my eye is the name of the person who posted it.

“One winged butterfly…”

There’s one response below it.

“I’ve also tried and failed to die many times, let’s make it a success together this time.” That message is written by none other than “Nazuna.”

(This section is from a different character's point of view, it’s more obvious in the Japanese version.)

The police and adults were all nice to me. I’m the perpetrator and the defendant. It was an action that was too excessive to be called self defence. However, the defendant was a minor, and horrified by the death. I was scared after killing her. The victim also wanted it badly. Therefore, there’s room to account for the circumstances. While listening to the judgement, I truly felt like “that girl” had died within me. Everyone around me blames her. Especially my papa and mama. They said they’d sue her parents. That girl has ruined my life. After seeing my mama crying, I’ve realized something. I have to kill that girl again.

Minami is the only one who blames me. Only Minami gives me the pain and judgement that I desire. But pain isn’t what I truly want. I want more bloodshed. I need butterfly wings. I want to cut into someone again. Someone I hold dear. But I understand. I can’t fly as I am now. I only have one wing.

“Nazuna” and I have agreed to fly together. I chose the spot. It’s a nostalgic place. The man at the office remembers me. When I greet him, he replies with a smile.

“I’m relieved to see you doing well. I was worried.”

I smile. I show him my box of cakes.

“I came here to see my teacher today. Isozaki-sensei loves these cakes.”

“I’m sure he’ll be delighted. Should I call him and let him know you’re visiting?”

“No, I want to keep it a secret. It’s a surprise.”

I lie with a smile. He believes me, and lets us through. He doesn’t seem suspicious of Nazuna, who is standing behind me, at all.

“I’m glad he didn’t figure us out, just like you said, Futaba.”

“It’s okay, no need to be nervous.”

Nazuna seems relieved as well once we get past the entrance. The man at the office is going to be so surprised when he finds out what I actually came here to do. But he’s not a bad person. I hope he doesn’t get too mad.

We head straight for the rooftop. Fortunately, we don’t pass any teachers on the way. A few of the students give us weird looks because of the cake box, though. I’m sure they’ll just assume we’re visiting someone. The stairs to the roof are fenced off to prevent people from going up. It’s not a problem, though. We help each other climb over. Nazuna is a boy, but I’m stronger. The door to the outside is locked. I don’t get flustered over it. I put in my duplicate key. The lock hasn’t changed from three years ago. The teachers are completely unaware that I made a copy. Naturally, they didn’t know what I did up there, either.

I’m a bad girl now. I’m different from back then. I can do the things I couldn’t before.

“Hey Futuba, is this the spot?”

“Yeah, it’s just ahead.”

I look back and nod at Nazuna. I slowly open the door. The sky looks so close, like I could reach out and touch it. I wish I could fly over Asahikawa, over to the sunset over the mountains.

“This is a really nice spot,” Nazuna says happily.

I nod. There’s a torn spot on the fence, just like always.

“All that’s left is for us to both jump,” Nazuna says.

“Yep.” I nod again.

We’re both here, but I’m really doing this alone.

“But it’s impossible for us to jump side-by-side when it’s this narrow.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be okay as long as we hold hands.”

I smile, and Nazuna smiles back. His smile is beautiful, like a real girl, but he says that he truly hates the way he looks. His uncle beats him for crying, calling him a girl, or an idiot. I don’t see what’s so bad about being called a girl, though. So this feminine appearance is a form of rebellion for Nazuna. He’s pretty, but angry. I feel bad for Nazuna, dying angry.

I put the box of cakes on the ground. Nazuna starts crawling through the hole in the fence. I follow behind him. Right now, “that girl” is whispering to me. I reach my hand out, but… I can’t do it. I can’t bring myself to push him off.

“…Is something wrong?”

“N-no. It's nothing. I figured it would be better for you to go first, Nazuna,” I say.

He smiles at me.

“Sure, but why? Are you scared, Futaba?”

“Not really… I’m not, but…”

“Futaba?”

Every time Nazuna calls me that, it feels like someone inside me is screaming back. The wind is cold up here. It makes me shiver.

“It's nothing, let’s just hurry.”

“Okay… Let’s go, then.”

“Everything is ready, so should we jump?”

Nazuna nods. I can’t believe it’s happening. I’m glad. I’ll finally get to be a butterfly. Nazuna leans against the fence.

“Don’t worry. Even if you’re too scared, I’ll make sure to push you, Futaba.”

“Huh?”

In an instant, Nazuna pulls hard on my hand.

“Wh…!”

I have no time to yell. No time to resist. Nazuna tries to pull me off the roof as hard as he can.

“Go on, fall. Futaba… Please say you’re not trying to betray me.”

I somehow manage to cling to the fence, but Nazuna wraps his arm around me.

“Ugh!”

“Why are you resisting? Were you lying? Everyone’s the same. Just before you die, you say it hurts, you don’t want to anymore, you want someone to save you… I guess the wicked and clever people are the only right ones in this world.”

His hands are almost around my throat. The wire fence is digging into my hands.

“Come on, die!”

My butterfly barrette falls out of my hair. It’s a matching set with Minami. My hair is caught in the fence. It hurts. I’m on the verge of crying. Is this my punishment for trying to take the easy way out?

“What’s wrong?! I thought you wanted to die?!”

I wanted to die? Did I really want to die? Or did I just want to kill? Ah, I can’t do this. It’s impossible for me.

It was impossible from the beginning. I could never be Futaba. I couldn’t be a butterfly, either.

“No! Let go of me! I can’t do it! I’m not really Futaba! I’m Hitoe! Futaba is already dead!”

Nazuna is too strong. His hands are thinner than mine. I twist my body with all my strength, and push Nazuna away. Why is this happening? I thought we came here with the same goal in mind. Nazuna wasn’t here to commit suicide. He came here to kill me. Nazuna is trying to kill me. It was impossible for me, after all. I can’t kill someone again. I understand now, but Nazuna is different. At this rate, I’ll die. He’s still trying to push me down.

“Let go!”

I reach for the box of cake and slam it on his head.

“Ngh!”

The sturdy cake box does more damage than I expected. His grip loosens for a moment. However, it’s still just a cardboard box. I know that. Still, the slippery cream is my ally. I escape by climbing between his legs. He tries to grab me, but his hands are too slippery from the cream. All I can hear is the splattering sound. We’re tangled together, covered in cake. Nazuna won’t give up. Why does he want to kill me?

“I’m sorry! Please forgive me!”

It's always like this. I can't do anything right. That's just how I am. I wasn't even brave enough to die alone. I don't have the will to kill people, but I don't have the will to be killed either. I thought it was impossible to live as a murderer. I just want to go back to that person. I want wings, like Futaba. If I become her, I can transform, too. I can undergo metamorphosis. Futaba will be revived inside of me. That's what I thought, but-

"H… Help me."

Nazuna finally chooses a method other than just trying to push me down. He reaches for my throat, just like before. He looks incredibly angry. I wonder if I have the same expression. Will I die with a face like that?

"Guh… Ugh…"

Am I being punished? Is this because I killed Futaba? Because I betrayed Minami? Because I made my parents suffer? And sensei… I'm sorry, Isozaki-sensei.

"Haah… Cough…"

It's no use anymore. I prepare myself. Suddenly, it's easier to breathe. There's a bright light.

"Good grief. Students aren't allowed on the roof. What are you doing up here? Don't make me get angry with you."

My ears vaguely register that annoying, unpleasant voice. I immediately know whose it is.

"Isozaki-sensei…"

As I look over, I see Itsuki Isozaki-sensei standing there with a thin smile.

(Back to Shoutarou's perspective)

By the time I get to the roof, Nazuna-san is on top of Hitoe-san. They're both covered in cake, and Nazuna-san's hands are wrapped firmly around Hitoe-san's neck. Isozaki-sensei is the first to move. He smashes a white crystal into Nazuna-san's body at the same time he notices us. Nazuna-san's grip loosens.

"Shoutarou, did I ever teach you about what sodium hydroxide, a strong base, looks like?"

"Huh?"

I'm caught off guard by the sudden question.

"It's caustic soda," Sakurako-san quickly adds.

"Oh, um… You use it when you make homemade soap, right?"

"Right. It's extremely alkaline, so it can melt your hand if you touch it. It'd be pretty bad if it got wet right now, so don't move. If I move around carelessly, I might spill my water."

"Eek…" Nazuna-san lets out a small whine.

Isozaki-sensei takes a bottle of mineral water out of his pocket.

"W-why do you have that stuff?"

"I'm a biology teacher, not a chemistry teacher. It looks like I accidentally grabbed it instead of the oligosaccharides. I might get fired over this… But you can't do anything now."

"Wha… N-no…" Nazuna-san trembles.

Isozaki-sensei smiles as he waves the water bottle back and forth.

"This way, Hitoe. Walk slowly," Sakurako-san calls out to her.

Hitoe-san slowly gets up, and staggers over to Sakurako-san. She almost loses her balance, but Sakurako-san catches her. Seeing that, all the strength leaves Nazuna-san's body as he slumps down.

"…"

Isozaki-sensei deliberately opens the cap on the bottle, and drips some onto Nazuna-san's head. He lets out a terrible shriek that makes me want to cover my ears.

"Sensei!"

I rush over, but Isozaki-sensei bursts out laughing.

"What's this? That's strange… This is just glucose."

The crystal dissolving on his body isn't making him melt. Nazuna-san is shocked, and begins to cry.

"Even cake contains water. You should really make sure you know what you're doing before handling unknown minerals. Honestly, it's a good thing I'm such a rational teacher. If I wasn't, I might have brought the real thing." He starts laughing, but nobody else thinks it's funny.

Poor Nazuna-san was so terrified that the lower half of his body is wet. I don't think it's from the water bottle.

"…Why did you do that?" I can't help but ask.

This pathetic person is nothing like the pretty Nazuna-san I knew,

"What the hell do you not understand?!" Nazuna-san yells.

Sakurako-san lets go of my hand.

"I don't understand why. They say humans think with their brains, and feel with their hearts, but both are trapped under bone," Sakurako-san says indifferently.

Nazuna-san's makeup is starting to wash off, making him look rather unsightly.

"…I see. Nobody really knows what's in their heart. No one can hear what it's saying," He says in a creaky voice.

Eventually, he looks straight at me.

"I really believed you were going to die with me. I thought it would be okay if I could die together with you… But you're a liar."

"Nazuna-san…?I

Phantom told me about the terrible environment he grew up in. I wonder if that was really true. I wonder what kind of bond formed between the two of them through their messages, before I took over the account. I'm not a liar. I wasn't going to die from the start, but I can't tell him that. I really just wanted to help. I wanted to make things better where I could. Nazuna-san clearly looks disappointed in me. He starts running away in an instant.

"Nazuna-san!"

I have one more chance to grab his hand, but all I get is air.

"Ah!"

I try to chase after him, but Sakurako-san pins my arms behind my back. I can't catch him.

—See, you weren't really looking at me.

For a moment, I thought I saw him look back at me. His face is twisted from crying. He's heading straight for the fence surrounding the roof. Specifically, the spot where the fence is broken. There's no stopping him. He runs straight off, and into the fiery sunset.

Final Part

There's a cacophony of sirens from the ambulances and police cars in front of the school.

"Man, that was a close one. It could've been bad," Utsumi-san says, smoothing out the wrinkles in his shirt.

Nazuna-san fell onto a mattress that Utsumi-san and the others prepared, so his life isn't in any danger. I'm so glad. I can't be happy, though.

"Why did you stop me when Utsumi-san hadn't given the signal yet? What if Nazuna-san had died?!" I accidentally start shouting.

Sakurako-san furrows her brow.

"He was agitated. If I hadn't stopped you, there was a chance you could have ended up falling as well."

"If you'd made one wrong move, he would have died!"

"Life is precious. I hate it when people die. But I'm not a saint. Sometimes you have to weigh the options and make a choice. What's wrong with choosing you?"

Sakurako-san doesn't even seem to understand why I'm angry. It makes me even more irritated.

"But…"

"Anyway, Hitoe is safe as well. You should be glad too, boy," She says, wiping cream off my cheek with her finger.

I don't feel like talking to her anymore, so I turn my back.

"I'm glad we made this time,"

In front of the flowerbed he maintains, Isozaki-sensei hands a handkerchief to Hitoe-san, who is crying while covered in icing.

"Sensei!" She cries, and tries to hug him.

However, Isozaki-sensei bluntly refuses the hug saying he doesn't want his suit to get dirty. He picks up the letter under the crushed cake box.

"Ah… That's… Kind of my suicide note, I guess…I

"'I'm sorry, Sensei. Thank you,' huh? Honestly… What's with this? If that's what you were going to write, I'd be happier if you just cursed me. It would have been better if you'd just written that you hate me."

"No, I don't hate you at all. I'm grateful. But I… I have to atone for what I did to Futaba. I should take Futaba's place… Otherwise it isn't fair. I feel bad for Futaba, so…" Hitoe-san bursts out crying. Isozaki-sensei smiles.

"If you really don't hate me, I'll protect you and Minami. After all, flowers are much more beautiful than butterflies. Did you two forget that?" Isozaki-sensei says as the digitalis flowers wave behind him.

It's not easy to make the human body fulfil your desire to die or kill. It even sometimes betrays the desires of those who desperately want to live. I suddenly recall my teacher's words. Why do humans lose their way in life so much? Who did Phantom really want me to save? Sakurako-san says it was Hitoe. I'm not so sure, though. One thing is for certain, though. I lost this game with Phantom. I lost the bet. On top of that, there's something I only noticed later.

The suicide note is missing from my pocket. I don't know why, but I feel like I've lost something important.

I heard that Nazuna-san committed suicide afterwards, but I don't think that's true. I'm sure he was just looking for someone to hold his hand. The world doesn't let some people win. Still, I don't want him to die. Maybe that's just my ego. This result may have made him unhappy.

Evening will come again. The time of the wolves. Watching the curtain of darkness fall over the city makes me want to cry. I can't help but hope that at least for just tonight, everyone feels the warmth of kindness.

Second bone: 4am Knock

Part 1

I am Hiroki Utsumi, a police officer that protects the order in the peaceful city of Asahikawa. I read Raymond Chandler's stories once a week to reaffirm my way of life. "You can't live if you're not strong. You're not qualified to live if you're not kind." I feel like those words were written just for me. He's strong when he fights, and of course, his Ray-Ban sunglasses are cool. I'm not confident enough to walk around the city at night with sunglasses on.

It's a rule that my days off start and end with alcohol. I like to get drunk from drinking whiskey, vodka, gin, or anything else that makes my stomach feel hot. All the women I date know how to make a prairie oyster by the time we break up. It's because of that I drank some strong alcohol at the end of my night shift, enjoyed a good night, and had my fill before going to bed. It's a shame there's no woman next to me, but humans are born alone and die alone.

I'm not enough of a romantic to describe it, but I had a dream about a really nice girl that night. She was a bad-girl type, and she had a huge chest, but she was obsessed with bones… Unfortunately, that nice dream came to a sudden end.

"Hm… Woah?!"

The sensation of warm water dripping on my face startles me awake. I thought for sure one of my exes came for revenge, but I didn't see anyone. Instead, the sight before me is much more troublesome than that.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!" I shout. "What is this?! You've gotta be kidding me?!"

There's water dripping from the ceiling.

"S-stop it!"

I shout at the ceiling, but obviously nothing happens. The water just so happens to be dripping directly onto my desktop computer. It's a big, old computer. It's definitely nothing cutting edge, but I've been saving up dirty pictures on it for over 10 years…

"Waah!"

I desperately try to put my arms over the computer to shield it from the water, but to no avail. The whole thing is soaked. People don't think straight when they're in a panic, after all.

"No! Stop it!"

As you'd expect, putting a bucket under the drip doesn't help much, either. It's just a drop in the bucket, you could say. It fills up in no time, and then I have to dump the water out. I keep dumping the bucket into the sink, but after a while, I start to wonder why I'm even bothering with it. I only have one bucket at my place, after all.

"Ahh!"

Still, I can't give up just because I'm up against a tough opponent. I can give up once I'm cold and dead. I pull out all my mugs, empty beer bottles, empty instant noodle cups… Then I remember the pail I have in the bathtub.

Despite how I look, I love baths. I'm not too picky about where I live, but my one requirement is that I have my own bath. I got my own pail to use in the bath that's much more reliable than the cheap ones. I head to the bath to go grab it.

"…"

Then, I return to my senses. Where's the water coming from, anyway?

"…This isn't good."

I look up at the ceiling. I've seen some of the other rooms in this apartment. The layouts alternate on each floor. Which means that right above my computer is… Someone's bath.

"Hey, hey, hey!"

This isn't the time to be worrying about my dirty pictures. I rush out of my room with my phone in my hand. I contact the landlord while I run up the stairs.

"Old man! Hey! Your bath is leaking! Are you okay?"

I slam on the door while my call to the landlord connects, but he doesn't reply. He doesn't respond to the intercom, either. The door is locked.

"This might be kind of dangerous, but I have to get inside. I'll go around on the balcony."

I hung up the call after getting the landlord's permission. The landlord will be here soon.

In the meantime, I visit the person living next door. He's a young man who lives alone. He doesn't look pleased when I suddenly show up at his door. I'm still soaked, after all. He understands immediately with a quick explanation. He lives in a messy, one room unit like me. I go out onto his balcony. It's really small.

I kick down the fire door and enter the neighbouring unit. The window on the balcony is unlocked, probably because it's been hot lately. Sure enough, as soon as I enter, I can hear and smell him running hot water. The water hasn't gotten into the living room yet. It's neat and tidy here. A photo of his deceased wife catches my eye above the sideboard, next to a photo of his grandson.

I quickly head toward the bathroom, and enter the changing room. Water comes rushing out. It isn't flowing out into the rest of the house because it's leaking down into my room from a crevice somewhere. Oh well, we wouldn't have known otherwise. I step into the flowing water barefoot, and make my way to the bathroom.

"Old man!"

As I feared, he collapsed in the bathtub with his clothes still on. Hot water keeps pouring out of the faucet, reaching up to his back. I pull him out of the tub, and call for an ambulance and the police. He's not breathing, and his heart has stopped. I instinctively know it's futile, even though his body is still warm. The water just recently started overflowing. I'm not very good at giving up.

I keep giving the old man CPR until the ambulance arrives. Deep down there's a voice telling me it's pointless, but I ignore it. Fortunately, the ambulance arrives quickly. The landlord and police arrive at the same time, too. The old man is pronounced dead before the ambulance loads him up. They say he probably went to check the water temperature, but slipped and fell into the tub. It knocked him out.

I used to often hear him humming while he walked around the building, and he would always clean up the garbage that the crows scattered around. He was a nice man. After everything was said and done, the landlord and the old man's relatives paid me a bit of money as an apology for all my trouble. Well, the only damage I really suffered was the loss of my dirty pictures. My emails and important stuff are backed up on the cloud. The most I'll have to do is replace my rug, but… It's soaked in water that the old man's corpse was sitting in, even if it was just for a short while. Just the thought of it makes me feel ill.

Well, I'm more accustomed to dealing with this kind of thing than the average citizen. Unfortunately, this is a daily occurrence. If you live every day to the fullest, you'll see that there's

good and bad parts to every day, no matter what you do. I try not to let it get to me. I helped give directions to the elderly twins who spoke in unison, wandered the park helping a kid look for his lost game console, getting into a petty drunken argument with my coworkers, getting scolded by my superiors at work, getting scolded by my mom on the phone, and listening to my older sister rant about how she's hungry all the time after getting pregnant with her third kid.

One week goes by. It's just a normal week, like any other. As the days pass by, the ceiling dries and I start to forget about the old man, but after 2 or 3 weeks, I noticed something was wrong. After four weeks, the stain on the ceiling started to look like a person's face. By the fifth week, I'm completely convinced. It looks exactly like a human face. It has a bald head, round ears, and a square jaw… It looks just like the old man that died before. He has the same pained, distorted expression as when I discovered his body. It's like he's blaming me for not finding him sooner. I shouldn't have been worried about my computer, I should have gone and saved him right away.

I'm worried about the face, but I'm even more worried about the signs that there's someone else in my apartment, even though I live alone. I sometimes feel a presence like someone is standing where my computer was, or I'll hear the sound of water running in the bathroom. Once I started hearing the hollow sound of someone wailing, I decided I'd had enough. I can't do this anymore. I can't live here anymore.

Part 2 (Shoutarou's perspective)

While sipping on gran's tea and consulting with Utsumi-san, Sakurako-san raises one eyebrow suspiciously while she sits in her usual chair. It's 10am. The breeze flowing in from the open balcony door carries the scent of damp soil due to the rain last night. The weather is clear today. It's a nice day to have off. Sakurako-san doesn't even try to hide her wariness about what kind of trouble is being brought to her on such a beautiful day.

"So, why did you say you have urgent business with me?"

"Oh, well, it's more like I have business with Shou-chan."

"With me?"

Utsumi-san scratches the back of his head while he forces a small laugh.

"Also, while I'm here, do you mind if I stay for lunch?"

"Well aren't you quite the calculating one!" Gran says as she fills his teacup again.

"Sometimes I just get a craving for gran's home cooking. It tastes like a mom's cooking, or a grandma's. When I was a kid and both my parents were working, I'd always have dinner with my grandma." Utsumi-san proudly talks about how her pumpkin dango are superb.

"Gran's cooking is a little different from my mom's. The flavours are a little sweeter, and it gives me this warm, fluffy feeling. It's relaxing."

Just as he says, gran's food does tend to be sweet. Overall, it's delicious, but has different merits from my mom's cooking.

"Hohoho. Utsumi-san, did your grandmother ever teach you how to zip your lip?"

"Urk!"

Gran smiles shyly at the compliment, but doesn't forget to reprimand Utsumi-san as well.

“Even if you don’t butter her up, gran still won’t let anyone leave here hungry. She always makes sure everyone eats well.”

Utsumi-san makes a V sign. I’m also glad I get to share a meal with Utsumi-san. I unintentionally start smiling. Hector jumps up and down happily.

“Eek!”

Utsumi-san, who’s sitting next to Hector, hugs his knees to his chest.

“You still haven’t gotten used to Hector yet?”

“Yeah… I probably never will.”

How can someone dislike him when he’s so cute? Hector sits down with his back facing me, begging to be pet. I rub him all up his back and onto his neck and cheeks. I pick up the extra fat he has around his throat and hold it up against his cheeks so he looks like an arctic fox. It’s more like I’m teasing him than petting him, but he seems pretty happy with it. He looks over his shoulder to smile at me. Even Sakurako-san can’t help but grin when she sees his smile, but Utsumi-san is trembling in fear.

“The area around his mouth is all black bumpy! It’s gross! It looks like a cloud ear mushroom!”

“…Cloud ear mushroom?”

Sure, the border around a dog’s mouth is all bumpy and squishy, but it’s just their lips. I pull Hector’s head over to look, but he pulls away like he’s saying, “stop it!” He’s right… It does kind of look like a cloud ear mushroom. I don’t see why that’s a good reason to hate dogs, though.

“I hate cloud ear mushrooms even more than I hate animals. It’s just impossible for me to deal with dogs.”

“I see…”

I like all animals, but no other animal compares to the partnership you have with a dog.

“Hmm… Animals aside, I agree with you about the mushrooms. I can’t even think of them as food,” Sakurako-san wrinkles her nose.

“No, no, no, cloud ear mushrooms are delicious! They have a unique texture and flavour, so they make a great accent.”

These two aren’t exactly ideal role models. Don’t they know they should be grateful for their food?

“Well, anyway, you’ve been causing a ruckus this whole time, Utsumi. Weren’t you going to say something about the old man you found?” Sakurako-san says, clearly tired from the uproar. She leans back in her chair and calls Hector over.

He happily slides himself into her arms. Sakurako-san happily pets Hector while directing the conversation back to the accident Utsumi-san witnessed.

“…Right. The doctor confirmed that he died of drowning.”

Utsumi-san’s smile instantly disappears.

“I see. The term ‘death by drowning’ can encompass several actual causes of death. He could have had a heart attack while in the bath, and slipped under the water, making it an underwater death. Isn’t it safe to assume it was an accident?”

“An underwater death? Is there a difference?”

Utsumi-san nods. Between drowning, underwater death, and dying in water, I didn’t know there were so many different terms, so I ask Sakurako-san.

“Mhm. It’s generally considered death by drowning if the cause of death was water entering the nose and mouth. In situations where a corpse is discovered in the water, it’s called an underwater death regardless of the cause of death. Deaths in baths are usually caused by heart attacks.”

I see. So it is different from dying due to drowning. It’s true that there could be other causes, as well.

“In this case, the death could have been caused by drowning after falling, or by a heart issue. The fact that the doctor declared he drowned to death means they don’t think he had a heart problem.”

“How does drowning happen?”

“People typically drown in rivers or the ocean, when the lungs and trachea become flooded with water. Sometimes people with underlying medical issues will drown in the bath,” Sakurako-san says, running her hand down her chest. “Getting water in the lungs results in pulmonary edema. Even if you inhale hair, the oxygen can’t reach the lungs. The capillaries around the alveoli can’t exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide, meaning oxygen can’t circulate around the body. Therefore, it causes symptoms like choking.”

That’s one way. Sakurako-san sticks out her left thumb.

“Then there’s another way. You’ve seen it before, boy. When bubbles overflow from the lungs. The mucus from the airway mixes with the water, producing fine bubbles that fill the trachea and bronchi. As a result, oxygen can’t reach the brain, causing hypoxia.”

Utsumi-san lets out a groan.

“That must hurt… the old man looked like he was in a lot of pain.”

Utsumi-san holds his throat. I also feel like I’m about to suffocate.

“5 minutes,” Sakurako-san says suddenly.

“Huh?”

“The time it takes. They say it generally takes about 5 minutes for someone to die from drowning.”

5 minutes… I repeat it back to myself. Sakurako-san nods.

“After falling into the bathtub, the old man would have been panicking. He would reflexively inhale water through his nose, causing water to enter his eustachian tubes. That, coupled with internal bleeding, would throw off his balance. He couldn’t get up. That’s the process people go through while drowning, even in places you wouldn’t think they could drown.”

Honestly, I was wondering how it’s possible to drown in a bathtub. It feels wrong to just blame it on being elderly. You could also say this is a tragedy caused by the human body’s instincts.

“He must have been really surprised. In that chaos, he inhaled a lot of water. It’s not a matter of ‘drinking’ the water. When they’re drowning, people ‘breathe’ the water in as if it were air. As a result, laryngospasm is triggered, and consciousness is lost soon after.”

Sakurako-san isn’t good with emotions, so she calmly, insensitively teaches me about the road to death in the human body. The content is interesting, but it’s pretty harsh to talk about this in front of Utsumi-san, who just watched an old man die.

“Sakurako-san…”

Utsumi-san has his head down, and both hands clenched on his thighs. His hands are trembling. I hurriedly try to stop Sakurako-san.

“Well, whatever. In my opinion, he likely didn’t suffer for more than two minutes.”

“Two minutes?” Utsumi-san lifts his head.

Sakurako-san gives a decisive nod.

“Yeah. He wouldn’t have been in pain after that because he’d have passed out… Well, I don’t know if that seems like a long time or a short time to you. I wouldn’t say he suffered for long, though.”

“…” Utsumi-san falls silent again.

I don’t know if two minutes is a long or short amount of time, either. Objectively, I don’t think it’s long, but it could also be an eternity. The old man would have been in a considerable amount of pain during that time. Sakurako-san is simply telling the truth, not trying to comfort Utsumi-san.

“Since the man’s heart had already stopped when you found him, it would have been difficult to revive him. When a person is drowning, the most important thing is for the heart to keep beating. With appropriate treatment, there’s a fairly high recovery rate as long as your heart doesn’t stop.”

Sakurako-san suddenly sits up in her chair and claps.

“You might not have made it in time, but you had the correct reaction. You kept calm, and made the right judgement. Your actions were praiseworthy.”

“Yeah, that’s right! There was a disaster prevention presentation at my school one time, and the firefighter said that it’s actually really hard to revive someone. I hope you don’t blame yourself, since you did more than I could ever do. I’m proud of you, Utsumi-san!”

It’s really reassuring to know there’s a police officer like him protecting the town. I applaud him, too. Utsumi-san is clearly forcing himself to smile. He doesn’t look happy at all, despite our praise.

“But I still wish I had made it in time…” He says sadly.

“Utsumi-san…”

“If I had noticed just a few minutes earlier, things might have turned out differently… His heart may have stopped, but he was still soft and warm, so he must have been alive just moments before…” Utsumi-san stares at his hands.

It was his hands that failed to restart the man’s heart. Sakurako-san stands up.

“Don’t think about the ‘what ifs’. It’s only the result that matters,” Sakurako-san says, standing right in front of Utsumi-san. “There’s no point in feeling guilty. It’s important to think about what comes next, rather than dwelling on the past. It’s a waste of time.”

Sakurako-san reaches out a hand and forces Utsumi-san to look up at her. She holds his head in both hands.

“Do you understand me, Utsumi? You did a good job. You have nothing to regret or be ashamed of. The old man doesn’t have a grudge against you. Once you die, it’s all over. He’s not trying to punish you.” Sakurako-san gently, slowly tells Utsumi-san while looking into his eyes.

“Uu…”

Utsumi-san puts his right hand on top of Sakurako-san’s, and starts to sob. His face crumples as the tears keep falling.

“K-Kujo-san!”

Instead of crying louder, he clings to Sakurako-san’s chest. He buries his face in her.

“Guh!”

She’s surprised at first, then tries to comfort him like a child. She quickly realizes his true intentions, and her face turns red all the way up to her ears.

“How dare you take advantage of me?! Hey! Let go!”

I pull Utsumi-san off of her. I overdid it a little, causing him to fall back onto the couch.

“Hector, go! Get him!”

I spur Hector on. He looks very displeased with me, but leans against Utsumi-san like I asked him to.

“Gyaah! Stop it, dog!”

“Oh, shut up! Why do you always cause such an uproar whenever you come over?!” Sakurako-san shouts while guarding her chest with both arms.

I’m just slightly relieved, though. I don’t want to see Utsumi-san cry.

Part 3

Gran’s lunches have been even better than usual lately. Sweetly seasoned gomoku rice, simmered octopus and daikon radish, and fried asparagus wrapped in meat. The gomoku rice is full of ingredients that are still in rather large pieces. The simmered daikon and octopus are surprisingly soft, and the daikon has absorbed a lot of the umami from the octopus, making it quite a treat. Then there’s the fried asparagus. It’s simple in concept, but the crispy pork surrounding the asparagus, and topped off with plum and mayonnaise makes it excellent. The refreshing acidity of the mayonnaise makes me want to just keep eating it. I’m really glad I get to eat such delicious food.

It’s been 2 weeks since Phantom’s game. They haven’t contacted me since then. I’m gradually getting back to my daily routine.

“Kujo-san is probably at least a D.”

“…”

Utsumi-san drives me home after we finish eating lunch. He’s muttering to himself with a lewd look on his face.

“Her shirt was nice, too. I’m going to have dreams about the gap between her buttons.”

“…If I were to kick you as hard as I can right now, would that be considered a crime?” I ask while watching the scenery out the window.

The lights along the streets are starting to light up.

“Shou-chan, you’re already guilty of threatening me, so I think that would be up to 2 years of prison or a fine of up to 300 000 yen.”

Wouldn’t it be considered a crime to sexually harass a woman who already has a fiancé? If it’s not illegal, there’s a huge flaw in our legal system.

“Geez! Actually, didn’t you want to ask me for a favour?”

I accidentally hit my hand on the dashboard. Utsumi-san just laughs at me.

“Yeah… Your mom works in real estate, right? I was kinda wondering… If she knows a cheap place I can stay.”

“Oh, so that’s what it was.”

He's been trying to stay upbeat this whole time, but now he lets out a long sigh. He should have just visited me in the first place.

"It's an unplanned move~ I'd like to keep it as cheap as possible. It's probably impossible, though~ I'd love a nice place with a nice view, a parking lot, separate bathroom and bathtub, with a budget of 30 000 yen a month. It'd be even better if a pretty older lady lived right next door. It'd also be nice if there was a convenience store nearby, it got a lot of sun, and the utility bill-"

I'm starting to get a headache from listening to him talk so much. There's no way my mom can get a perfect place like that, especially on short notice.

"I'll ask, but don't expect too much."

"Thank you~! I'm so glad to have you as a friend!"

"It's not a problem, so just keep your eyes on the road! You're supposed to be a police officer, aren't you?!"

Utsumi-san is smiling wide. It's just like Sakurako-san said. It's always an uproar with him around, to the point where I'm reluctant to take him places. My mom got along well with Utsumi-san whenever he came to visit while I was hospitalized. He got on her good side by recommending an air conditioner specifically made for people living in colder regions. Fortunately, Utsumi-san's completely unreasonable request actually came in at a great time.

"There is one."

"Really?"

Contrary to my expectations, my mom actually has something that fits what he wants.

"Let's see… It's a 2LDK with a separate bath and washroom, and a parking lot… And since Shoutarou owes you, you don't have to pay the security deposit. I'll charge you the cost when you leave."

"And the rent…?"

Oh yeah, that's the most important part. Utsumi-san asks my mom, bending forward in anticipation. The sun coming through the window causes his glass of iced coffee to drip condensation on his leg.

"With a police officer living there, it'll give everyone in the area peace of mind. As a bonus, the rent is… Let's see…"

My mom crosses her arms and pretends to think hard about it, probably just to bother Utsumi-san. With the way Ustumi-san acts, it almost looks like they're doing a comedy skit. I can hear him groaning from the tension. Eventually, my mom spreads out her hand.

"F… Fifty thousand yen?"

Ustumi-san's shoulders drop. Well, it's a reasonable amount for this area. However, my mom shakes her head, and slowly starts lowering her fingers.

"Four… three?!"

She stops after lowering two fingers, and smiles.

"That's right. How does 30 000 yen per month sound?"

"Really?" Utsumi-san and I say in unison.

Utsumi-san overreacts, flinging himself backward.

"There's a few things included, but the rent is 30 000 per month. Is that okay?" My mom says, knowing from his reaction that it's more than enough.

Even I know that it's an exceptional price. I look over at Utsumi-san. His eyes are huge with surprise.

"T-that's… Almost the same as my current one room apartment…"

"Is that so? Well, due to the neighbourhood it's in, transportation is a little inconvenient. If it's close to where you work, it won't be a problem as long as you have a car. The building is a little over 10 years old, but I'd normally charge around double what you'll be paying."

That neighbourhood isn't far from a convenience store and drug store. It's a bit far from any bus stops, but that won't be a problem if he has a car.

"Seriously?! Are you sure?!"

"Of course! It's what you asked for, right?"

My mom is being incredibly generous, to the point where it's suspicious. As far as I can tell, this is a great offer. Still, I can't see why she would cut the rent in half just because it's an acquaintance.

"Mom, could it be…" I lower my voice so Utsumi-san can't hear.

I can only think of one reason for all of this.

"Oh, you already figured it out? Yeah, someone died there before haha." My mom admits it and laughs.

"Someone died?" Utsumi-san stares at us blankly.

"Uhh… Actually, well… Yeah…"

An apartment where someone died before. Before selling an apartment, you have to make sure the renter is aware of flaws, scratches, and other things like that. So basically, this is just another flaw. It's just something that can make the tenants uncomfortable, like if there's a noisy road nearby. It's just a particularly bad case.

"What?! Someone died?!"

"Yeah, it seems so. The previous tenant died. In cases where the person died of natural causes, you don't have to notify new tenants after 6 months have passed. I don't want you to hear it from someone else first, so I thought I'd let you know," My mom says casually with a laugh.

The smile immediately leaves Utsumi-san's face. I mean, of course it would. He decided to move because the man in the apartment above him died, and now the place he was going to move to had someone die before.

"But the room wasn't damaged at all, and the body was discovered quickly. I've even had it remodelled since then, and had an exorcism done haha."

My mom laughs like it's no big deal and asks Utsumi-san if he agrees to move in. Utsumi-san can't bring himself to nod in agreement.

"Nakano-san, the person who died, was a nice person. When he was young, he volunteered as a firefighter, and often patrolled around the neighbourhood while walking his dog. I can't imagine someone like that becoming a wandering spirit."

"Oh, Pon-chan's owner?"

When I hear that, I realize which apartment my mom is talking about. He was an old man who only lived 5 minutes away from my house.

"A dog… A room that smells like a dog would be kind of…"

"The dog lived at his daughter's house, so it's okay."

"I see…"

It doesn't seem like my mom is convincing him. He takes a sip of his iced coffee even though it's diluted because all the ice melted. Utsumi-san still seems reluctant.

"Ah, it's hot out, huh?" My mom says, turning on the AC.

My mom is the type that forbids using the air conditioner if the room isn't over 30 degrees, so it's pretty lavish having it on when it's only 27 degrees.

"Pon-chan was a little chubby and the old man couldn't just sit and watch, so he took the dog on a long walk every day. He'd often talk to elderly people who live alone, or children playing on his walks."

My mom seems like she really wants to recommend this apartment to Utsumi-san. It'd be nice if he came to visit sometimes. Just sometimes. I'd be relieved having Utsumi-san living nearby, too. With a police officer right around the corner, Phantom would have a harder time getting to me. I add on to what my mom is saying.

Nakano-san was really worried about Pon-chan, who was supposed to be a miniature Shiba but was shaped more like a Pomeranian. Unlike a long haired Pomeranian, though, Pon-chan had short hair so they're all fat, not fluff. But even with all the walks, Nakano-san's daughter spoils Pon-chan too many treats, so their weight didn't improve dramatically. However, I can still remember Nakano-san slowly, kindly walking to match Pon-chan's pace. Even though he was tall and wearing a neatly ironed shirt, he always had bed head at the back of his hair. It was cute.

"Ever since his wife died two years ago, he became active in local volunteer organizations. Since there were always lots of people coming and going from his house, his body was found right away. It seemed to have been heart failure. He was over fifty years old, but he still had so much life left…"

There's a lot of people who are sad to have had to part with him. That makes it troublesome for the next person who moves in, too.

"It's hard to rent out the room, since everyone knew him."

Everyone in the area knows it. That apartment is the one where Nakano-san died. It's only natural that people don't want to rent it after they know. Even if the period where the new tenant has to be notified has passed, it's even more unpleasant for them to hear about it from their neighbours. However, as long as a room is rented out to different people, that kind of problem is inevitable. It salts the wounds of the bereaved family, as well, but the landlord also has to make a living.

"Well, I have to pay attention to how his relatives feel, too. I'm not a monster, but I can't just leave the room empty forever."

Eventually, they come to the agreement that he'll pay the security deposit and rent on a two year lease, so my mom will only be out the exorcism fee. After the lease is up, the obligatory reporting period about someone dying in the apartment will be over. The rumours will fade after two years, too. My mom said it was a very reasonable solution. She wanted to have someone move in as soon as possible, so she isn't losing money on the room.

"Nakano-san's daughter is married and has a family, so it would be too much for her to pay half the rent to keep the room empty. Unfortunately, I'm trying to run a business here," My mom says with a bitter expression, drinking her diluted iced coffee. "So I'd be grateful to have someone move in there. What do you think? It's not too expensive, and it was recently

remodeled. It's south facing, has a parking lot, separate bathtub and washroom, and the rent is 30 000 yen. Personally, I think it's a great deal."

As long as you look past the fact that someone died there, it's a really nice place. The rent is cheap, and it checks off everything on his wish list.

"Yeah, but someone died there…"

I guess he just can't look past that part. It's easy to understand why Utsumi-san would be reluctant, considering the reason he decided to move in the first place.

"Ah, what should I do?

He ruffles up his hair. He looks really troubled. It's a great fit for him since it's move-in ready, since he doesn't want to go back to his old place.

"Then why don't you try it out for a few days and see?" My mom offers, seeing his struggle.

"Even though it's haunted?" Utsumi-san's face turns pale. "No, but I haven't decided on it yet…"

"How are you going to decide if you haven't even seen it yet?"

"You have a point, but…"

There's no way of knowing if there's a ghost there, since nobody has lived there since the previous tenant died. My mom crosses her arms and groans.

"…Then how about this? You have a one week trial, and my kid will help you move for free."

"What?!"

I've suddenly been volunteered for manual labour.

"Hmm… Then how about if you agree right now, I'll give you a 27 inch TV!"

"Huh?! A TV?!"

We bought a new 40 inch TV for the living room at the same place we got the air conditioner. The 30 inch TV that was in the living room before went into my room, and the 27 inch that I had in my room before got bumped out. Honestly, the extra once was a problem for us anyway. Utsumi-san lifts his head with a not-so-dissatisfied expression, even though he's just having unnecessary stuff pushed on him. Honestly, my mom is so mischievous. However, I understand that my mom just wants to reduce the burden on Nakano-san's daughter as soon as possible, so I decide not to say anything.

"Besides, if I remember right, your neighbour is a pretty office lady."

I'm not sure if that last part helped, but Utsumi-san finally breaks and says, "I'll try it out for a week, then."

Part 4

Utsumi-san seems really scared to spend the night in his old room. He's decided to move in a hurry, so he's starting his trial period today. Even though he only really needs a change of clothes and a sleeping bag, he brought a bunch of stuff. He says his bum is too delicate, so he has to use the high quality toilet paper that's almost 50 yen per roll. He seems very pleased that his new home has a washlet.

The room itself is rather large and pretty, even without any furniture. It's in the middle of three units so he thought it wouldn't get much sun, but the large, south facing window in the living room lets plenty of sunlight in. The sun exposure and location aren't bad, and Utsumi-san doesn't seem as scared of the room as he did at first. It feels new, so it doesn't feel like there's any traces of death.

And so, four days have gone by since Utsumi-san started living in his new room. He's been complaining that there's "something" in the apartment. I didn't believe him until he phoned me on the verge of tears.

"Shou-chan, I can't do it. I can't live here!"

"What?"

"There may not be a place for me in this world, after all…"

I'm on my way home after school. I'm shocked when I pick up the phone only to hear crying on the other end. There's no breeze today and the heat from the sun is beating down on me, adding to my annoyance.

"What are you talking about? Isn't your mind just playing tricks on you? I'm sure it's just because you're scared."

Fear makes everything look suspicious. No ghosts are going to pop out. Utsumi-san keeps hounding me, even though I'm denying it.

"I don't know about that. You can only say that because you haven't heard it, Shou-chan. This weird sound… It's definitely not something from this world!"

I finally break after listening to him groan and mutter about it.

"Ah, fine! I get it! I'll stay there tonight, then."

"Really?"

"This won't happen again!"

Fortunately, Utsumi-san's new (temporary) house is only a few minutes from mine. I have school tomorrow, but if I get up early and stop by my house, there shouldn't be any issues. It's a hassle, but the only way Utsumi-san will be convinced is if I make an objective judgement. When I get home, I tell my mom about the strange noise in the room. She doesn't seem too worried about it. After all, nobody else has heard anything in that room. I'm sure he's just mishearing something mundane because he's scared.

After eating dinner, I head to Utsumi-san's house with my sleeping bag in hand. It seems that his dinner tonight is a beef bowl bento that he didn't cook for himself. The unique, slightly sweet scent of beef fills the room.

"So then, what's the noise?" I ask Utsumi-san.

We're in his living room with only a TV and a fan while eating snacks and having juice (he has beer though). Utsumi-san turns on the TV my mom gave him. He's probably trying to change the atmosphere so that just in case Nakano-san's ghost really is in the room he can't hear our conversation. The laughter of the entertainers on TV resound through the empty living room.

I wonder how much Utsumi-san believes in ghosts. I don't hate horror, but after meeting Sakurako-san, I'm quite skeptical of their existence. However, Utsumi-san is serious. I also wait for his reply with a serious expression.

"Well, every day at four in the morning, I hear a knock on the wall."

"A knock?"

Nakano-san's corpse was found in the rightmost room. Apparently he died while he was sleeping. Utsumi-san seems to be afraid of that spot now, so he's been living between the living room and the room next to the problem room. At around 4am he hears a knocking sound coming from the wall in that room.

"Apparently… Nakano-san died in that room."

"…"

He looks dead serious and acts like it's something terrifying, but it's hard not to laugh at him. I have to pinch myself so I don't burst out laughing.

"Are you… Are you sure you're not just mishearing something else?"

According to my mom, the most common causes of eerie noises are building equipment, heaters, air conditioners, and elevators. We can rule out elevators, since this building doesn't have one. It must be one of the other things, but I can't tell which one unless I hear it.

Thanks to the sleeping bag, handheld lamp, and mosquito coil, staying at Utsumi-san's (temporary) house is unexpectedly exciting. It feels like I'm camping. I stay up late, listening to a slightly intoxicated Utsumi-san tell me tales of his heroism, which may or may not be true. We both have school/work in the morning.

After all this, I still don't believe Utsumi-san's horror story. I'm sure he's just exaggerating, and he just heard something else. I end up falling asleep, but I have an alarm set on my phone to wake me up at 3:50am. That's just before the time when he hears the knocking. I take a deep breath, and pull both arms out of my cozy sleeping bag. I still don't believe him, but as 4am approaches, I start to feel nervous. Even though it's important for Utsumi-san to join me in this, he's completely conked out.

It's such a strange time of day. I wouldn't call it "the middle of the night," but it's definitely not morning. I hold my breath as the promised time approaches. I peek at my phone. 6 minutes left… 1 minute left…

"…"

It's 4 in the morning now. It's quiet outside, and nothing is happening in the room. All I hear is the rhythmic sound of Utsumi-san's snoring. 5 minutes go by, and I have yet to hear a knock. See? Of course nothing happened.

I start to feel sleepy again, so I curl up and roll onto my side. I bet I'll be tired at school today because of all this. PE class will be tough if I'm tired, but my biggest problem will be my English test. People call my English teacher, Kajiki-sensei, "the monk" because his voice drones on like a monk chanting sutras. Just as I'm starting to drift off to sleep, I hear a noise.

"Hm?"

I hold my breath. It sounds like it's coming from somewhere in this apartment… It's a sound like someone is knocking on the wall. I jump out of my sleeping bag. Before I can locate the source of the sound, it stops just as suddenly as it started. I check the time. It's 4:30.

"…This… can't be happening."

I can't believe there was actually a noise.

"U-Utsumi-san…!"

I try to shake him awake, but he's sound asleep. Ugh, he's always like this when it's important. But I definitely heard something. It was only for a minute, but it was definitely a knocking sound. It was echoing in the room, so I don't know exactly where it came from. For some reason, I feel like it was coming from the back room.

Sakurako-san says the dead can't speak, since ghosts don't exist. I'll try to convince myself that I believe that. It's Sakurako-san's fault that I'm so scared right now. No, actually it's Utsumi-san's fault for asking me to help. No, maybe it's my mom's fault for volunteering me to help. I don't want to be here. I'm scared. I try to blame anyone but myself as I crawl back into my sleeping bag, trembling all over.

Since I couldn't get a wink of sleep after that, I fumble my way through PE class, then fall asleep in English. Kajiki-sensei turned from a monk into a demon when he yelled at me for sleeping in class.

Part 5

Since this may or may not have something to do with the occult, I decide to ask Ranka Azechi, the most knowledgeable person I know in this subject. After class, I tell her and her new friends about my horrifying experience.

"Cool! There's actually people who rent places where people have died?"

However, Azechi gets sidetracked. She's sitting on top of Kougami's desk with her legs dangling. She raises her voice like she's talking about something super interesting.

"I didn't know the family got billed after someone dies like that," Kougami, who has been listening from next to me, has a cloudy expression.

If the body isn't discovered right away, the cleaning can be quite tough. The floor and wallpaper often have to be replaced, and the security deposit usually isn't enough to cover it. You often have to do an exorcism, even if it's just for appearance's sake, otherwise the people living nearby will be uncomfortable. Naturally, if you don't get a new tenant right away, weird rumours start cropping up, and it isn't unusual for the people in surrounding rooms to move out. Utsumi-san did that, too. Depending on the situation, the landlord often has the bereaved family pay the rent cost. However, in most cases, the rent for at least 2 years, remodelling fee, and the cost of the exorcism is around 2 million yen.

Fortunately, the remodelling fee wasn't that high this time, and since it would have been difficult for them to pay a lump sum, my mom accepted half the rent each month. I think it was a nice compromise. Some landlords will continue to charge the family rent until a new tenant moves in, in some cases they charge for the rent of the surrounding tenants that moved out, or even charge tens of millions of yen for a new unit to be built. It's only natural to need to be compensated for damages to your property. I feel bad that the people who just lost a family suddenly have to pay millions, or even tens of millions of yen. It also isn't fair for the landlord to lose out on all that money, though. It's a tough topic. I feel guilty that they have to carry such a large financial burden on top of the sadness of losing a loved one, but that's a whole different can of worms.

"So your mom wants Utsumi-san to rent that room no matter what. She sure is kind," Kougami sighs. "But now the room really is haunted."

"Yeah… As Kougami said, I didn't believe it at first but… I really heard a sound."

Sakurako-san can always see the truth, no matter what. However, Sakurako-san shot down my request for her to stay the night at Utsumi-san's house. Or more accurately, gran shot it down.

“I can’t let the young lady spend the night in a place with only men!” She refused immediately.

“That’s reasonable…” Kougami says with a forced smile.

But who can we rely on, now? It feels like there’s nowhere left to turn.

“Well, it probably won’t help to ask Azechi about it.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” Azechi makes an exaggerated pout.

“I just meant that since you’re such a scared-cat, and you’ve never actually seen a gho-“

Azechi kicks my shin as hard as she can before I finish speaking.

“That’s not how to ask someone for a favour, Tatewaki-kun. I thought I’d offer some advice, but now you’ve offended me!” Azechi turns her nose up at me.

“Ah… Sorry. It’s just that you’d definitely be too sca- Ow!”

She kicks me in the opposite shin.

“I may not have ever seen a ghost before, but I know how to hear their voices,” she says with a fearless grin.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Do you… Do you mean like a ouija board?”

Azechi cheerfully rummages around in her backpack. I don’t have any fond memories of ouija boards. The last time I used one was at Shouko-san’s place for the seance about a year ago. A lot of people were hurt by the answers from that seance.

“Honestly… I don’t think that’ll solve the problem.”

Azechi is smiling, but I don’t feel good about this.

“Don’t worry, it’s not a ouija board. This is even easier than that.”

I feel like saying ‘that’s not the problem…’ Azechi rips a sheet out of her notebook, and borrows a red pen from the teacher’s desk.

“This is the Charlie Charlie challenge. It’s a lot simpler and more accurate than a ouija board.” Azechi says confidently.

She gets Kougami to stand up so that she can sit in front of the paper, then carefully stacks two pens in a cross shape. She writes “yes” and “no” in alternating quadrants of the page, making sure the red pen is on top of the cross in the middle.

“You use this to summon a Mexican ghost called Charlie, and ask him yes or no questions.”

Azechi sounds so confident that Kougami and I don’t bother objecting.

“To start, we have to call Charlie.”

Azechi casually reaches for the pens. I can’t imagine a ghost being very friendly.

“Charlie, Charlie, are you here?” (TL note: Italic sentences are in english)

Azechi must have practiced this, since her pronunciation is really precise.

“Charlie, Charlie, can we play?” She chants again.

Of course, nothing happens.

“Charlie, Charlie, can we play?”

After the third time, the pen slowly rotates until it points to “yes.” Kougami gulps.

“Charlie, Charlie, can you understand Japanese?”

The pen points to “yes” again.

“You can ask it whatever you want!” Azechi smiles at me.

This ghost must have studied hard if it can understand Japanese.

"…What, you still don't believe in it?" Azechi asks me in a dissatisfied tone.

Kougami looks a little nervous, so I guess she's in the clear.

"I don't know how exactly it works, but aren't you just moving it yourself?"

Azechi puts both her hands up so we can see she isn't touching it, and this time asks Charlie a question in Japanese.

"Charlie, Charlie, does Tatewaki-kun have a crush on someone?"

I'm surprised by the unexpected question. Before I can answer, the pen spins and points to "no." Yeah, of course it'd say that. Of course I don't have a crush on anyone.

"No, huh? That's unexpected."

Obviously I would have said no, but I'm surprised the pen pointed to no, too.

"Do you see now? I wasn't touching it." Azechi says confidently.

Kougami looks bewildered, like she can hardly believe her eyes. I'm still not convinced, though.

"Then let's try asking another question. Charlie, Charlie, does Yuriko have a crush on someone?"

"Wha- Stop it! What are you asking it, Ranka!" Kougami shouts as her ears turn bright red.

"Ah!"

Kougami immediately blows on the pencil to push it. I accidentally make eye contact with Azechi. She grins and shrugs like a mischievous kid.

"A-ze-chi!"

"Ahahaha. Well, it probably just moves from peoples' breath or the wind, but some movements can't be explained. Apparently it's supposed to be a manifestation of your psyche or a subconscious power or whatever. I'm sure it's nothing weird like that, though." Azechi recites a number of different possible reasons.

It's no use, there's no way this is going to help. This has been a complete waste of time. As I start to leave school filled with disappointment, I decide to ask Isozaki-sensei for help with revealing the true identity of the ghost as a last ditch effort.

"Hm… Now that I think about it, I was going to wax the classroom tomorrow." He says while looking down at the students participating in club activities outside the window.

"I'll help."

"Also, you've seen the bus stop in front of the school right? I feel bad for the neglected flower bed over there…"

"Just be direct if you want me to fix it up."

"Oh, and they also opened a croissant and taiyaki shop nearby."

"…I'll try to get a spot in line."

How is he okay with making all these demands of me? It's not like I have any choice but to accept it.

"Really? You promise to do everything? No matter what I ask?"

"I will, as long as you can actually help!"

It's too late to go back on my word. I stretch out my pinky finger, and wrap it around Isozaki-sensei's.

"It's a promise, then." He's grinning.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Okay, I’ll head to Utsumi-kun’s place once I feel like going.”

“Huh? But you just promised…”

“Oh? I thought you were just promising to complete all my requests. I never promised to do what you asked right away,” Isozaki-sensei says with a nonchalant expression.

“Ugh…”

How could he do that? I was an idiot for trusting him. It’s a tough world out there. You can’t trust anyone but yourself. I head home, despite my disappointment, and nap until dinner time. I’m exhausted, but I still want to know what that sound was. I messaged Sakurako-san about it, but she just said, “the dead are gone. They can’t make noise.” I’m still positive that I heard something this morning. I have to sleep. I need to save my strength. Tomorrow night, I’ll stay over at Utsumi-san’s place again. This time, I’ll definitely figure out what the noise is.

Part 6

“Well, I think it’s possible that a person is doing it.”

After a lot of thinking, I came up with the simple solution that it might be one of the neighbours knocking on the wall, not a ghost.

“Doesn’t that mean someone is trying to harass me by slamming on the wall?”

“Exactly. Have you done anything that would bother your neighbours?”

Utsumi-san makes a blatantly disgusted face at my question.

“Shou-chan… You do remember that I’m a police officer, right?”

I know that, but so far he’s been pretty annoying.

“Everything might just simply be a problematic neighbour. Why don’t you just visit them and say hello? Tell them you’re thinking of moving in.”

“Oh, great idea!” Utsumi-san says, and claps his hands.

We hurry over to the nearby cake store and get 4 small sweets, then return to the apartment. There’s 6 apartments in the building. There’s one vacant room on the upper floor, but both the ones surrounding Utsumi-san’s room are occupied. It’s currently 6 in the evening. Unfortunately, both the families on the second floor are dual-income, so nobody is home yet.

“It can’t be helped, we’ll just greet the downstairs neighbours for today.”

First we’re visiting the room on the left. The lights are on, so there’s probably someone home. A woman responds when we ring the intercom. We quickly explain the circumstances, and she opens the front door.

“You’re going to move in here? Well… The person who lived there before said that the living room window is a bit too big, so it gets cold in the winter… So if you move in, you might want to put an insulating sheet over the window in the winter. Other than that, it’s a pretty comfortable room. There isn’t a lot of storage, though,” Seki-san, the woman who lives next door, kindly explains.

She’s wearing a cool, long dress, and looks to be about the same age as my mom. That said… She’s a rather beautiful woman. I find myself having to look away from her full chest while she’s talking. The mole next to her plump lips is somehow charming. She replies to us while rearranging women’s sized shoes in the slightly messy entrance of her home.

“…Utsumi-san?”

I jab him with my elbow after noticing he has a lewd look on his face. Seki-san not only seems to be lovely in appearance, but she also seems to be quite caring. She said “the person who lived there before,” out of consideration in case Utsumi-san didn’t know about what happened to Nakano-san.

“Um… To tell you the truth, we already know about Nakano-san.”

Utsumi-san is finding it hard to say, and trails off. “Ah, I see,” Seki-san says, looking relieved.

“I would have felt bad if you hadn’t known… But I’m glad. I was worried about Nakano-san’s daughter after she said she’s still paying the rent, even if it was only half.”

When Seki-san adds, “you can drop by any time!” Utsumi-san looks completely infatuated.

“Nakano-san… He used to chat with the neighbours while walking Pon-chan. He was a nice person.”

“Oh, really? I just moved in with my mother in law recently, so I didn’t know the Nakano couple too well. Her dementia was getting worse as the years went on and she kept forgetting things. I was sad during the funeral, but I kind of felt like they were in a better place now,” Seki-san says with a lonely smile.

“What?” Utsumi-san and I look at each other in surprise.

“Nakano-san was a devoted husband. He’d drink with his wife in the evenings on weekends, but when his wife died, he stopped drinking completely. Drinking alone must have brought back memories of his wife… It’s heartbreaking.”

Tears well up in Seki-san’s eyes.

“My husband just drank and slept all day on his days off,” she adds.

So Nakano-san was a good husband, and he was lonely after his wife passed? I guess he was kind to everyone to try to fill the hole in his heart.

“The rest of us are sad about his passing, but I like to think he’s happy with his wife up in heaven now.”

In the end, we just ended up talking about Nakano-san, but she seemed like a nice, friendly person. Even though I don’t live in this building, she gave me some chocolate covered asahimame as a gift. She’s generous and kind, so I trust her.

The apartment on the opposite side from Seki-san’s has two sisters living together. They’re both beautiful office ladies in their 20s. I remember my mom telling me about how they look like twins. Today, only the younger sister, Reiko-san, is home. We greet her the same way as Seki-san, and she brings up the lack of storage again. She doesn’t seem to know that I’m the landlord’s son.

“Nakano-san? One time, a pervert went after my sister, and he chased the guy away from us. He said to call him if anything happened again… He was kinda like a father figure.”

Reiko-san comments on how close he was to his wife, too. Apparently the same is true for the young couple that lives above her. He was gentle and a good husband, and now apparently he was an ideal father figure. It’s unfortunate that he lost his wife, though.

After returning to Utsumi-san’s room, neither of us say anything for a while. I can’t stop thinking about how many people loved Nakano-san, who always had his wife on his mind. At least they had a peaceful life living here together 2 years ago. After all this, I can’t even talk

about the knocking sound. At least it doesn't seem to be blatant harassment, so I'm glad I don't have to start doubting the neighbours.

"You know… I'm not the kind of person who believes in ghosts," Utsumi-san mutters while sprawled out in the living room.

I don't think he was someone who would be harassing people postmortem.

"But maybe he had some regrets."

Since he was so kind, maybe there was someone, or something, he couldn't help but worry about.

"For example, maybe there's an important message he wants to convey to someone."

Even if he was a ghost, I don't think it would be easy to find out what's bothering him. However, I don't think the neighbours said anything particularly strange. Maybe the couples that live on the second floor that we haven't spoken to yet are suspicious? Utsumi-san was going to bring me to an expensive, all-you-can-eat yakiniku place, but I don't feel like going. Hugging my knees, I let out a sigh. It shakes the convenience store bag at my feet.

"…Oh!"

I suddenly remembered something.

"Utsumi-san… Since it's come to this, let's try necromancy."

"What? Necromancy? What the hell?" Utsumi-san gives me a puzzled expression.

I feel the same way, even though I said it. There's probably no such thing as ghosts, so this is probably going to be pointless. If they do exist, performing a necromancy would be a bit more meaningful. I run home and bring back some stationary, then draw a cross and write the letters just like how Azechi taught me.

"W-will this really work? I mean, am I doing to get haunted? Or possessed?"

"Well…"

I don't really know, either.

"Please hold your breath. We have to let it move on its own."

Both of us pay attention to our breath so we don't accidentally move the pencil. This time, it'll definitely be someone other than us that's moving the pencil. I prepare myself, and settle in front of the notebook.

"*Charlie, Charlie, are you here?*" I timidly recite the chant. "*Charlie, Charlie, can we play?*"

Utsumi-san gulps fearfully. I suddenly feel even more tense.

"*Charlie, Charlie, are you here?*"

It doesn't reply. I try one more time.

"*Charlie, Charlie, are you here?*"

At that moment, there's a creaking sound. It sounds like the house is screaming.

"S-Sh-Shou-chan!" Utsumi-san backs away, trembling.

The pencil points toward "yes". In the same instant, the intercom rings. Both of us jump up.

"Isozaki-sensei?!"

"Icchan?!"

We say it at almost the same time. It's not Nakano-san's ghost visiting us. Isozaki-sensei, Azechi, Kougami, and Imai are all standing at the front door.

"Sensei, you came!"

“Icchan! I never expected you to come since you’re always leaving my messages on read!

I feel like jumping on Isozaki-sensei right now. We’re completely panicked. Just having Isozaki-sensei here makes me feel so much more secure. Deep down I wish it were Sakurako-san that came over, though.

Isozaki-sensei shakes off Utsumi-san, who has been clinging to his arm, and straightens out his suit with a disgusted look.

“Sensei said he was worried about you, Tatewaki-kun,” Kougami says, grinning.

“You were really scared with just the two of you here, weren’t you?”

Imai gives me an anxious look while standing next to Azechi, who is puffing out her chest.

“Are you okay, Shoutarou? It’s just… When we went to that festival at Tokiwa park in grade 1, you got so scared of the haunted house that you cried…”

“You didn’t need to bring that up! I’m fine!”

I can’t believe my best friend would go and out my dark past in front of all these people. Anyway, it’ll bother the neighbours if we make too much noise in the entrance, so we all move to the living room. Kougami brought some western style hors d’oeuvres from her parents’ restaurant. Utsumi-san got some onigiri at home, and got some sushi delivered, so it’s turning into a little party. Maybe this could be considered a move-in party.

“What? Did the pencil really move? There’s no way. The Charlie Charlie challenge was originally from some movie or something. There’s countless things that could have moved it. Apparently Charlie is another name for the Nahuatl god Tezcatlipoca. There’s no way you could summon that with a scrap of paper,” Azechi says, laughing at us.

Then why would she tell me about it… I was really scared, too. I toss the paper and pen next to the sink. I know I saw the pen move, though…

As I chat with everyone, my fear gradually fades away. There’s no way Charlie actually exists. I’m sure the knocking sound has nothing to do with ghosts. I don’t think Nakano-san would try to bother or harm people, even after dying.

After a few hours, almost everyone heads home. It’s just Utsumi-san, Isozaki-sensei, and I left. Apparently Isozaki-sensei is planning to stay the night tonight. Utsumi-san is glad, since he’s still scared of the sound. Isozaki-sensei tries to ease Utsumi-san’s fear by telling him that the knocking might be the start of a joke (apparently foreign countries have ‘knock knock jokes’). Since Utsumi-san is off duty tomorrow, he ends up drinking himself to sleep. Isozaki-sensei does his usual nighttime yoga routine before getting into his sleeping bag.

“If I don’t get enough sleep, it‘ll ruin my skin,” he says.

Now I’m the only one left awake. I didn’t think it would bother me anymore, but I’m starting to feel nervous now. I don’t feel sleepy at all. I decide to just play a game on my phone until I get tired. Eventually 2am turns to 3am, and I start to feel a little drowsy. Once 3:40 rolls around and I still haven’t slept, I decide to stay up until “that time.” Utsumi-san said before that it happens around 4am. The day before yesterday when I heard it, it was around 20 minutes late, so it’s not exactly 4 every day. I wonder why?

I look outside, and see that the sky is starting to get brighter. This is around the time when spirits supposedly come out. They come out in the early hours of the morning. The dead

of night is an ominous time, but I know Nakano-san was kind. Maybe he isn't trying to scare us, after all. Suddenly a gust of wind blows, interrupting my thoughts.

"…"

I hear a rustling sound and turn toward it. The paper from the Charlie Charlie challenge is on the floor. I pick it up and see there's a red stain on top of the word "yes". Besides starling me for a moment, nothing happens. There's just some tomato sauce on it from dinner.

"Oh, that's all…"

As I start to feel relieved, I suddenly freeze.

Knock... Knock... Knock… Knock…

The sound is faint, but I definitely hear it.

"Ugh…"

Knock, knock, knock, knock.

It's louder and clearer this time. It's definitely a knocking sound. The sound of the wall being struck. I understand. I'm sure of it. The sound is echoing from the inner room where Nakano-san's body was found.

"Eek…!"

I desperately try to shake Isozaki-sensei awake without letting my voice sound too panicked.

"Mm-mm…" He groans in displeasure.

"S… Sensei… The knocking…!"

I finally run out of patience and cover his nose and mouth with my hands.

"Fwah!"

It's enough to make even Isozaki-sensei jump to his feet.

"What are you doing?!"

"Sensei! The knocking sound!" We shout at almost the same time.

"…"

He doesn't say anything. He lifts his eye mask and listens. However, it's already too late. I can't hear the knocking sound anymore. The only thing I hear is Utsumi-san's snoring.

"…"

Smack! Isozaki-sensei looks down at Utsumi-san's innocent sleeping face for a while, then slaps him on the cheek.

"Wuh?!" The slap startles him awake.

He looks around sleepily, then lays back down and falls back asleep.

"Well, whatever," Isozaki-sensei yawns.

"No, don't just ignore it!"

"If the person himself fell back asleep without a care, there's no reason for me to investigate."

He curls up in his sleeping bag like nothing even happened.

"But that's just because he's drunk! This bothers him every single night!"

"Doesn't matter to me."

"Don't just brush me off!"

Isozaki-sensei fixes his eye mask and sighs like I'm bothering him.

"Did it really come from the inner room?"

"Huh?"

“Are you sure it didn’t come from outside?”

“From outside?”

He pulls one side of his eye mask up to look at me.

“The way sound travels is different during the day and night. Even if it sounds like it’s coming from inside, it might actually be coming from outside.”

So it could be someone out Nordic walking in the morning, or the newspaper being delivered, and it just sounds like it’s echoing through the room.

“You’re just a scardy cat,” Isozaki-sensei says. “There’s a saying that goes ‘the ghost, when examined closely, is withered silver grass.’ Even an innocent sound seems like the work of a ghost if you’re scared enough.”

He lets out another big yawn and pulls his eye mask back down. I guess he’s done talking to me.

“If you’re scared enough…” Is that really all it is? Sure, ghosts are probably just incorrect assumptions about things. But that sound… I’m sure I heard knocking. I close my eyes, but the sound keeps echoing in my ears. In the end, I can’t get back to sleep, even after dawn breaks.

Part 7

I’m relieved when morning comes. Sakurako-san said before that basking in the morning sunlight makes you release serotonin, but even more than that, I think the morning sun has some kind of special, divine power. Maybe it’s because I was born and raised in Asahikawa.

One theory of the origin of Asahikawa is that it came from the Chubetsu river, which the Ainu call “cup-pet”. Since the sun rises over that river, they called it Asahikawa. (TL note: Asahikawa means “morning sun river”)

Today feels like it’s going to be hot already. With the scent of humidity in the air from the morning dew, I walk down the street by Nagayama shrine to Sakurako-san’s house. A small bird that I don’t know the name of lets out a shrill chirp.

“Oh, young master. Good morning.”

“You’re up early, gran.”

“The older I get, the earlier I seem to wake up.”

Gran welcomes me with a smile, even though it’s so early. Hector wags his tail and jumps on me. Even though this place is so full of life, the land of the dead lies right behind the front door.

“Hey, boy,” Sakurako-san says from her usual chair.

She’s reading the newspaper and drinking tea in the living room. Gran is always grumbling about how Sakurako-san has so many old newspapers. She reads seven different publications, after all.

“You’re up early, too, huh?”

I look up at the clock and see that it’s 7am. I pet Hector while I wait for Sakurako-san to finish reading.

“I can only think of one reason you’d come to visit me this early. You all must not be able to figure out your ghost mystery.” She looks up from her newspaper and snickers.

For some reason, I feel like Isozaki-sensei and Utsumi-san tricked me into coming here in their stead.

“Utsumi believes it’s the word of a ghost, and Isozaki isn’t interested in figuring it out. Isozaki is bright, but he doesn’t invest himself in things that don’t matter to him. He just hates trouble.”

Sakurako-san closes her newspaper. Hector sits up expectantly, but she tells him, “you stay and watch the house.” Since Hector is smart, he understands what she’s saying and curls up on the floor to sulk. If we’re leaving Hector behind, this must not involve a corpse. I was worried there might be a corpse from someone other than Nakano-san hidden in the room. I have to stop thinking like I’m in a horror movie. I’m relieved. I know I can’t stay here forever, but I just want to stay in this calm, silent house instead of going to investigate. It’s so quiet and still here that it feels like time has stopped. Like a loophole in time. It feels like only special people are allowed to stay here.

I get into Sakurako-san’s car, and we head to Utsumi-san’s (temporary) apartment. During the car ride, I tell Sakurako-san about what happened yesterday. She lowers the volume of Diavel’s singing just a little bit today. She has a devilish grin on her face while she listens to my explanation. I’m impatient to find out what the noise is, but I’m starting to get nervous as we get closer and closer. I’m mostly scared that it’s a living person making the noise.

“Honestly, even I can tell what the cause is just from listening to your explanation. I don’t know whether the neighbours are hearing it or not, but they should have noticed by now. I just can’t understand you people.”

It definitely didn’t feel like the right time for her to say that. I’m confused about what she means, but she looks smug.

“The act of knocking on something inherently means that there’s another party doing the knocking. It can be used as superstition, or to check whether or not someone is available. If they knew that nobody was going to answer, why would they knock?”

She has a point. I sit up and straighten my posture. She snickers at me.

“You should know the answer now, boy.”

“Huh?”

“Knocking is an action performed to communicate with another person.”

I don’t understand what she means at first. I squint at her in confusion.

“Well, you’ll figure it out once we get there. All I can tell you is that the dead can’t hit the walls.”

Finally, we arrive at the apartment.

“Sakurako-san?”

Sakurako-san doesn’t head for Utsumi-san’s room in the centre, but instead walks straight to the room on the left.

“Sakurako-san, that’s not the right room!”

“Yes it is.”

Sakurako-san ignores my complaints and heads straight to Seki-san’s door.

“Wait, Sakurako-san!”

She rings the doorbell. It’s 7am on a Saturday morning. I know I shouldn’t be talking since I visited Sakurako-san already, but it’s too early to drop by unexpectedly. Sakurako-san doesn’t even hesitate to bother Seki-san.

“Coming!”

The wife of the couple comes to the door.

“Oh, you were here yesterday.”

She notices me and gives me a friendly greeting.

“Sorry to drop by so early.”

She shakes her head at my apology.

“It’s fine. I’m a morning person, so…”

“Are those your shoes? They seem rather plain.”

Sakurako-san pushes her way into the entrance and stares at a pair of shoes sitting there.

“Huh? What are you talking about…?” Seki-san sounds upset.

It’s true that the soft, simple slip-on shoes don’t seem like something a young person would wear.

“You’re the cause of the knocking sound. Don’t try to lie to me.”

Utsumi-san walks up behind us, and sleepily asks, “is something wrong?”

“Perfect timing, Utsumi. This is the true identity of your ghost. You should get an apology from her.”

“Wait a minute! Who are you to decide whether I’ve done anything to apologize for?!” Seki-san gets angry and tries to get up in Sakurako-san’s face, but Sakurako-san is faster than her.

“I’m not waiting to be shown in. You’re not the one I have business with.”

“Ah, w-wait…”

Sakurako-san pushes past Seki-san and heads further into the house.

“K-kujou-san! You can’t do that! Please excuse her!” Utsumi-san rushes after her.

Of course he’s flustered, a police officer can’t be associating with a trespasser. If things go south, this could get on the news.

“We haven’t spoken to the key person yet.”

Sakurako-san heads straight to a particular room, even though she shouldn’t know her way around the apartment.

“This is the old lady’s room. Oh, it’s locked from outside?” Sakurako-san narrows her eyes while she stands in front of one of the doors.

It’s on the other side of the wall from the room Nakano-san died in. Moreover, there’s a lock on the outside of the door.

“…We don’t like keeping her locked in there, but if we don’t, she’ll wander outside. We’ve had an incident with that before. She’s cognitively impaired, she has no sense of time. She has to be watched 24 hours a day.”

Seki-san clings to the door with a bitter, guilty look on her face.

“I’m not blaming you, though it’s a different story if you never let her out. I’m just asking you to control her behaviour. She can’t hit the wall in the middle of the night.”

“That’s…” Seki-san mumbles.

“You must have noticed, right? There was never a problem with it before now, though. It was a vacant room next door, after all. Additionally, since she’s elderly she isn’t very strong. If there’s furniture to absorb the sound, it won’t be very noticeable. I’m sure you’d just play

innocent if anything came of this. Fortunately, the man on the other side of the wall is simple and forgiving," Sakurako-san says, looking at Utsumi-san.

Utsumi-san laughs and scratches the back of his head, but doesn't deny it. Seki-san has an uncomfortable expression, but doesn't deny it either.

"But there's a reason for everything. There must be a reason she won't stop knocking," Sakurako-san says, looking at Seki-san.

"…Do you know the reason? Really?"

Seki-san stares at Sakurako-san, then nods and unlocks the door. Inside the room is a very old woman with a deeply wrinkled face sitting on the bed and watching TV. Sakurako-san kneels next to the old woman and greets her. The old woman curls her body up a bit, looking a bit cautious of Sakurako-san.

"We won't stay long. I just want to check something with you. What do you do first thing in the morning when you wake up?

The old woman slowly blinks, then points at the wall.

"To let him know I'm doing well," the old woman says briefly.

"What do you mean, mother-in-law?" Seki-san covers her mouth in surprise.

"Every day I knock to tell him I'm still doing well. It's to say good morning" The old woman smiles. "I promised Non-chan."

"Non-chan… Mother-in-law… Nakano-san has already died."

Non-chan… That must be a nickname for Nakano-san.

"Did she live here alone until you moved in here? The man who used to live next door was a kind person, so he must have been worried about having an old woman who lives alone next door. They probably agreed that she would knock on the wall to tell him she's still doing well. It's routine for her to knock on the wall when she wakes up in the morning."

Sakurako-san softly touches the wall of the woman's room. Just above the bed is a grey spot on the otherwise white wall.

"I'm sure she's still doing that… To let the person on the other side of the wall know she's okay."

Seki-san looks apologetic, but can't bring herself to look at Utsumi-san.

"I don't know whether you chose not to tell her that he passed away, or if she simply forgot about it. Either way, she believes her neighbour is still alive, which is fine. She has this slob living next door now."

"Well, I can't deny that…" Utsumi-san looks defeated.

I'm sure he won't mind a little noise, now that he knows the reason. Seki-san finally looks up, with an expression like she just realized something.

"Actually, we only learned that Nakano-san had died because my mother in law told us. She said he didn't respond."

At the time, they didn't know what she meant. They eventually decided to visit Nakano-san because the old woman was so insistent about it. As a result, they discovered Nakano-san's corpse. Because of their little secret, his body was discovered early. Unfortunately, they couldn't do anything about what happened to him, though. Still, discovering the corpse even a minute earlier is for the best. The true identity of the ghost was just an old, lonely woman knocking on the wall to say, "I'm doing well, how are you?" She's been trying to say that every day.

“Shou-chan… I’ve decided to move in here,” Utsumi-san says out of the blue. His eyes are all teary.

“Utsumi-san…”

“I’m going to live here! And starting tomorrow, I’ll return your knocks!”

Utsumi-san bursts into tears. The old woman looks surprised, but then offers him a handkerchief.

“Th-thank you, granny!” Utsumi-san shouts in a teary voice, clutching the handkerchief tightly.

Final part

Utsumi-san has been responding to the old woman’s knocks at 4am. Fortunately, no supernatural phenomenon occurred this time. He put his bed in the room where Nakano-san died for the old woman’s sake, giving me another glimpse at Utsumi-san’s kind nature. He thanked my mom enthusiastically for the great room. I’m glad to hear it. My mom was really happy about it, too.

That’s why I can’t say anything about it. The mysterious breeze and knocking sound from when I was staying at Utsumi-san’s place with Isozaki-sensei. At first it was faint, but then I heard a clear knocking sound. At first it felt like it was coming from outside the building, but the second time was different. That sound was clearer. It sounded like “someone” was hitting the wall from inside Utsumi-san’s apartment. I wonder if that old woman was really hitting the wall every morning without a reply because of dementia. What if… Maybe someone was knocking back. That “someone”…

“…Well, whatever. Ghosts aren’t real, I’m sure of it.”

It’s fine. No harm was done. The dead can’t hit walls. While thinking about it, I firmly vow to myself not to stay overnight at Utsumi-san’s house ever again.

Epilogue

I love riding my bike. Riding through Biei is nice and relaxing, since it has gentle hills. It’s fun seeing how the scenery completely changes once you get over a hill. Even though the inclines aren’t very steep, it still gets my heart rate up. When you ride in a car, you can’t feel the wind or temperature, and you can’t smell the earth. Sometimes I worry about how it’s too easy to never do things the hard way. I think that it’s something that makes you feel truly alive.

Above everything else, biking is my time to myself. It’s my time to face my inner thoughts. No matter how exhausting or painful it is, I just can’t stop pedalling. It makes me think about how I can’t escape from my thoughts. I’m just myself, after all. I can’t escape from my life, so I have to live as I am.

Yesterday, I received a reply to a letter I sent to Nazuna-san. The reply was blank. I wrote about how I'm sorry for lying to him, and that I'm worried about him. I said I wanted us to be friends. Nothing has changed, I still want to help him. Yet the letter I got in return was completely blank. I think it's supposed to mean he's refusing to speak to me ever again. Somehow, I feel like it's kinder to send a message like this, rather than use words. Though I definitely feel guilty for hurting him. Because of me, he tried to kill himself.

It's all because I didn't want to die with him… Is that really the truth? What would I have done if Sakurako-san hadn't stopped me back then? If I'd made it in time to grab his hand, we would have fallen together. I probably wouldn't have been able to pull him back up onto the roof… Thinking about the possibilities feels suffocating.

I ended up being saved by her again. It hurts to recognize my own weakness. The feeling of helplessness feels like a needle stabbing my heart. I want to think of that pain as the same pain I feel when biking up a hill. I suddenly hear the sound of a horn. I notice a brown Kangoo parked nearby. It has the same bumper sticker I'm familiar with.

"Hey, boy. What are you doing out here?" Sakurako-san rolls down her window and grins at me.

Just as I reach the car, Diavel shouts, "I'll take you to hell!"

"I should be asking you the same thing. What are you doing here?"

"I got a message from Tainaka-san saying one of his snakes died. He's giving me the body, so I'm heading over to pick it up."

Tainaka-san lives in the area with the birch forests. It's about a 30 minute ride by bike from here.

"The weather is still nice for now, but it's supposed to get worse later on. Want me to drive you home? You can come with me to Tainaka-san's place," she says, looking up at the blue sky.

"Hmm… I think I'll just go alone today."

"Really?"

She looks worried. I thank her for the offer.

"Yeah. Thank you for the concern, but I'll be fine. I don't mind getting rained on."

That's right. The weather is clear now, but it'll rain tomorrow. The road is flat now, but there'll be another hill. There'll be times when I can't go out because there's a storm. I want to have a strong will, so that nothing can shake me. I want to be able to stay out in the rain.

Sakurako-san looks like she wants to say something, but then reconsiders it. "Be careful, then," she says, handing me a can of juice before she leaves. It's a shiruko drink, which is out of season.

After she drives away, I can hear thunder in the distance.I'm definitely going to get drenched soon. I wonder if it's a metaphor for my future. Well, I won't let it bother me. I smile and start pedalling as fast as I can.